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LOVE STORIES MADE IN HOLLYWOOD

Andy Green

Kate & Leopold

Roman

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Kate & Leopold

novel

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The hands of the church clock moved inexorably forward, driven by a mechanism as invisible to humans as time itself, yet possessing the same merciless reliability. One more minute until three o'clock. One minute closer to eternity, as many a person in the streets of old New York used to say when their gaze up at the clock tower of Trinity Church made them aware of the passing of time. A minute that would be as irretrievable as the untold number of hours, minutes, and seconds that had passed since the beginning of time. Irretrievable...

The minute hand moved forward, the hour hand obediently following its path. The tower clock struck, first four times to mark the hour, then three times to indicate the number of hours past noon. Its sound echoed throughout Lower Manhattan in 1876, drowning even the rumble of carriages, carts, and handcarts on the cobblestones, piercing the bustle of the people who, admittedly, paid as little attention to it as to their own mortality.

The sound of the bell even reached the banks of the East River, where a multitude of city dignitaries had gathered around a platform on which a bearded man, chest puffed out with pride and emphatic in his voice, delivered a speech. But he was not the main attraction, but rather the bridge under construction behind him. Two enormous piers, supported by Gothic double arches, rose high into the air, one on each side of the East River. This ceremony was intended to

celebrate their completion. This bridge was intended to be more than just a connection between the two cities of New York and Brooklyn. It was intended to

be the bridge to a new era and indelibly remind posterity of those New Yorkers who not only possessed courage and self-confidence, but also a vision.

John August Roebling, who had designed the massive suspension bridge and now pathos-ladenly praised it from the podium, had led his fellow citizens into the new era. His strong German accent, which he hadn't been able to shake even after many years in his new homeland, did not diminish the impact of his speech, and even when he occasionally misspoke, people were lenient about it.

"Time is said to be the fourth dimension," he exclaimed,
"But for us mortals, time has no dimension. We are like horses with blinders. We see only what lies immediately before us, we try to predict the future, and from the past we form what we call history. How, you may ask, can man overcome his limitations? How can he leave his oh-so-limited present behind and gloriously immortalize himself in the continuum of time? I'll tell you, ladies and gentlemen!"

Roebling savored the moment of tense anticipation, his gaze sweeping over the assembled crowd, lingering primarily on his opponents who had tried to thwart the project and who now had to witness his great triumph. For there was no longer a shred of doubt that it was a triumph. The Brooklyn Bridge would still be here long after they had all covered the damp earth.

"The Person can his restriction only through one overcome", took he his previous Thoughts again on, "throughhis achievements and his creations."

Applause erupted, shouts of approval rang out. Even the workers on the bridge piers, who were

securing the steel cables, had listened to the great designer's words and now clapped loudly.

"Excellent," said the young man who stood at the edge of the audience and was the only one who had written down every word. Even at first glance, it was clear that he was a

He was a nobleman, not only because of his clothing, but also because he had a personal servant at his side. The nobleman's name was Leopold, Duke of Albany.

Leopold was so fascinated by the words of the German engineer he greatly admired that he completely missed the furtive glances of the ladies, for whom his elegant appearance offered the only pleasant diversion in what was otherwise a completely boring event. Meanwhile, he wrote incessantly on his pad, gliding the quill pen nimbly across the paper so as not to miss any of the inspired words, pausing only to refill the pen in the inkwell in his vest pocket.

“Just as the pyramids made Egyptian culture immortal,” John Roebling continued, “so will
May this building remind us of our culture until the end of time! For behold, this will be the greatest elevation on this continent, the greatest elevation of our time, indeed the greatest elevation on Earth!

With that, John Roebling concluded his speech. He bowed briefly as a brass band began playing. The crowd applauded enthusiastically, and behind the guests of honor, many of the workers also gathered, shouting "Bravo!" and tossing their hats in the air.

But why didn't Leopold join in the general cheering? He, of all people, to whom John Roebling's words had spoken so deeply from his own heart? He simply stared at a man standing a short distance away, laughing with delight. Then he held something Leopold couldn't recognize to his mouth and spoke a few words. To no one, only to himself. Who was this man? A spy? A saboteur?

Then the stranger noticed that he was being watched. Instead of
Instead of greeting the crowd as was fitting, he took a few steps back, trying to blend in with the crowd. Leopold needed no further proof: this man was up to no good.

Leopold pressed his already graying servant Otis Block,

He took a pen and inkwell and took a few steps towards the stranger. But at that moment a bright flash before him, blinded his Eyes and let him recoil. In the next moment fulfilled a biting Smell the air.

"For the herald, Your Grace," said a man whom Leopold, still dazzled, perceived only as a silhouette. Only then did he realize it had been a photographer's flash.

"I understand you will be publicly announcing your bride's name tonight?"

"Certainly," Leopold simply said. "But please excuse me now."

Leopold's eyes had recovered from the bright flash. They scanned the crowd tensely. Men in tails stood in groups, animatedly discussing the bridge-building project, while their wives vented their frustrations about social issues. In the background, the brass band was still blaring a brisk march, a hymn to progress.

Finally, Leopold spotted the stranger among all the people. Keeping a look back for his pursuer, he pressed on toward the street, where a row of hackney cabs waited for paying customers. Leopold was already pushing in that direction when he caught the eye of a group of distinguished young ladies who greeted him with smiles. If he didn't want to blatantly violate etiquette, he had no choice but to pay his respects briefly. Gritting his teeth, he resigned himself to the inevitable, approached them, greeted them, asked how they were, and wished them a pleasant day with a slight bow.

Precious minutes were lost, during which Leopold had watched from the corner of his eye as the stranger, constantly looking around, headed toward one of the cabs. When the stranger noticed that

Leopold had broken away from the ladies and was quickening his pace, he, too, began to walk faster.

But the next moment his escape was unexpectedly interrupted, as he ran into a man who was holding a sign

with the inscription: "This bridge is blasphemy!" in his hand. The protester was a real giant of a man. His face was almost completely covered in thick black hair, with no distinction between where the hair ended and the beard began. In a thunderous voice, he boomed: "God alone has the right to walk on water, not man."

The collision had caused the stranger to drop several strange-looking implements from his hand, which he now frantically gathered up, muttering an apology. A quick glance behind him showed him that his pursuer had caught up.

Leopold quickened his pace again. Nothing could stop him now. Nothing? Nothing except a pristine white handkerchief, seemingly dropped by carelessness. It suddenly lay before him, unmistakable. The pretty girl, her face framed by luxuriant, corkscrew curls created with curling irons, claimed to have noticed nothing of his nevertheless precisely calculated little mishap and continued to twirl the lightweight parasol in her white-gloved fingers with inimitable grace.

Leopold sighed. He saw the stranger jump into a cab and, a moment later, it rumble noisily down the street. But how could he have forgotten his duty and courtesy to a lady? Impossible! So Leopold bent down and picked up the handkerchief. But at the same time, he found something else. A pen, the purpose of which he wasn't sure at first. Only one thing was certain: It belonged to the stranger.

Leopold handed the handkerchief to the young lady. She blinked vigorously and probably breathed words of thanks, but

None penetrated Leopold's consciousness, for the unknown object completely captured his attention. Bowery Savings Bank, it said, since 1856. Next to it was a picture of the neoclassical facade. While the

young woman, who had hoped for some conversation with the nobleman, left disappointed, he pressed a button on one end of the pen, a click sounded, and a point protruded from the other end.

When Leopold touched it, it turned out that it dispensed ink. A writing instrument, then. Fascinated, he pressed the button again. Click. The tip retracted into its casing. Click. Out. Click. In. Click. Out. Click. In. But where did this writing instrument get its ink from?

"Your Grace," Otis's voice sounded at Leopold's side. The old servant was breathing heavily. He had hurried behind his master, which was an unusual effort for a man of his age, who had, moreover, practiced only a measured pace all his life.

"Get the carriage, Otis," Leopold said, looking up. A little further down the road, he saw the stranger's cab stop. A wagon was probably crossing. With a little luck, they might catch up with him. And then Leopold would ask him a whole lot of questions.

A short time later, Otis arrived in the count's carriage, the doors of which were adorned with the family crest. Leopold instructed Otis to follow the stranger's cab. Then he turned back to his writing instrument and made a few strokes on his paper, the uniformity of which surprised him. He examined the tip closely. Not a feather. Rather, a tiny ball rotating within the sleeve. I see, he thought. Behind it lies the ink, which, as it rolls, deposits itself on the ball. But wouldn't the ink be used up in an instant? Further investigation revealed that the sleeve could be unscrewed. A spring emerged, by means of which the sleeve advanced and retracted. The reason was obvious: this was to prevent the ink from drying on the ball.

"Ingenious," Leopold said tonelessly, fascinated by the technical finesse evident in the small object, which was hardly inferior to the construction of that bridge to Brooklyn. It's not just the big things, he thought; we can also erect a monument with the small things of everyday life. Like that stranger who was probably the

inventor of this masterful writing instrument, which was undoubtedly destined to triumph in every writing room in America and Europe.

At that moment, Otis' face appeared in the side window of the

Carriage. "We've lost the cab," he announced. "It's almost five o'clock. Shouldn't we..."

"This little thing here is full of wonders, Otis," Leopold simply replied. "Who is this stranger? Is he an inventor? Or how else did he come into possession of this object?" His gaze fell again on the lettering. "Take me to the Bowery Savings Bank!"

Otis sighed. His master's enthusiasm for technical devices had made him forget everything else, not for the first time. And far worse: He was even passionately pursuing invention himself. In doing so, he was only too happy to neglect his social obligations. Especially the one involving choosing a wife who would secure an heir for the Earls of Albany.

"May I suggest postponing the visit to the bank until tomorrow, Your Grace?" Otis finally said.

Leopold sighed. Of course, he knew why Otis was suggesting the postponement. Only an hour separated them from the start of the feast, to which his Uncle Millard had invited a group of promising young society ladies, from whom Leopold was to choose one. "How is it," Leopold asked, "that the third Earl of Albany is not allowed to do as he pleases?"

"As an earl, you have obligations, my lord," Otis replied sternly, "which you cannot get rid of."

A phrase Leopold had heard so many times in his life, and one he liked less and less each time. Resigned, he sank back into his seat and, with a tired wave of his hand, signaled to Otis that he resigned himself to his fate and withdrew his command.

He remembered the noble ideas with which he had once come to this country. Equality for all people, regardless of origin – he had considered that a foundation of this new world. He had wanted to be a free man among free men, dedicated to the progress of humanity. For one thing was certain to him: the future belonged to people like Roebling, while the

The world he came from, the world of nobility and privilege, was unknowingly approaching its downfall.

But knowing this, why was he still unable to break with his family's tradition, evade his uncle's demands, and live his own life? Did he even want to break with everything? No. He certainly respected the achievements of his forefathers. Without tradition, without history, there was no future and no progress, only the forward thrust of unbridled energies that would plunge the entire world into abject misery. Time will judge us, he thought, as he continually pressed the button on the writing instrument.

Even as he approached his uncle's house, Leopold watched with unease as the preparations for the evening festivities were underway. Servants were decorating the trees in the garden with garlands and lighting lanterns, even though dark clouds were gathering, heralding the imminent rain. With a boldness meant to conceal his nervousness, he jumped from the carriage before Otis could open the door for him. A butler opened the door with a formal greeting, which Leopold left unanswered. His muddy boots left imprints on the smooth marble of the hall. On the way to the stairs, Leopold passed a piano and ran his finger over the keys. The tuner, who was fiddling around in the innards of the instrument, jumped up in alarm and hit his head on the lid. When he saw Leopold, he swallowed the curse that had been on the tip of his tongue. Meanwhile, Otis had also entered. He flicked a servant over and silently pointed to his master's footprints.

"Leopold! Where were you?"

Leopold stopped at the landing. A white-haired man in a formal tailcoat hobbled out of the parlor into the hall. Clack-clack-clack, his cane went on the marble. Uncle Millard. His bad mood was written all over his wrinkled face. His bushy brows were tightly

drawn together, his forehead was wrinkled, the corners of his mouth drooped down. Before he could quite

Leopold had hobbled up, he had already moved on, whichUncle Millard got even more annoyed.

"Otis!" he called to his nephew's servant, who was following his master. "I demand an explanation! It's already half past five. And he's not even dressed yet!"

"Hewill be ready in time, my lord," Otis assured calmly.

But that wasn't enough for Uncle Millard. "Finished isn't enough," he exclaimed contemptuously. "It should shine!"

"Verywell, my lord."

Uncle Millard tapped his cane so loudly that it echoed through the entire house. He deeply disliked his nephew's behavior. His ideas, these so-called inventions—castles in the air, all of them! He always had his head in the clouds and completely forgot the ground he was walking on. And that ground was the family, the noble blood that flowed in both of their veins and secured their prominent social position. Why would Leopold want to earn something he had been born with? Incessantly shaking his head at his nephew, Uncle Millard hobbled back into the ballroom to oversee the preparations for the ball.

Meanwhile, Otis prepared a bath for his master. Leopold, who had poured himself a glass of brandy, undressed and slid into the tub. Outside, the first drops of rain were hitting the windows. He picked up the writing instrument and examined it thoughtfully, sipping his brandy repeatedly. The material irritated him. He had never seen anything like it before. It wasn't metal, nor was it wood. Water rolled off it. How could something like this exist without him knowing about it? And when he thought about it, it seemed too sophisticated, too perfect, for a brand-new invention.

Otis entered with a bucket of steaming hot water and carefully poured it into the tub. The rumble of a

carriage approaching came from the street. No doubt the first guests were arriving. Otis set down the bucket and extended his hand to Leopold. "Permit me?" Reluctantly, Leopold handed him the writing utensil.

With pointed fingers, like a dead rat, Otis picked it up and crossed his master's bathroom with it. He removed a piece of the stucco decoration from the wall, revealing a secret compartment containing a tin box. Otis placed the writing instrument inside, closed it, and slid it back into the compartment, which he then also closed again. Then he picked up the bath towel that lay ready and stepped in front of Leopold.

"Permit me a word, Your Grace?" he asked. His expression indicated that it was important.

Although the social distinction between them was always maintained, old Otis was more than just a servant to Leopold. After his father's death—his mother had died much earlier—he had essentially taken on the role of fatherly support that Uncle Millard had assumed, or perhaps even merely imposed, but in any case, failed to fulfill.

“What is it?” asked Leopold.

"You have undoubtedly expressed that the upcoming festivities fill you with unease, my lord," said Otis. "Permit me to suggest that we nevertheless make the best of them?"

Leopold swirled the brandy in his glass. "I was being sold like imported cheese," he said, not without bitterness.

"I hope you don't seriously want to tell me that among all the gorgeous debutantes my uncle has gathered for me down there, one could shoot Cupid's arrows into my heart."

Otis shook his head from side to side. "Perhaps there is a pearl among them after all. The spark of enthusiasm isn't only ignited in our minds, Leopold. There's also the heart. What's the saying? Love requires a leap."

"Is that what they say?" Leopold thought for a moment. Sure, ifhe'd found the right one. One who wasn't just intent on adorning herself with his name

and heritage like a diamond tiara. Unfortunately, he hadn't met such a woman yet. "Perhaps one day I'll dare to take that leap," he said, "when I meet a woman who harbors at least an ounce of the contempt for all this that I harbor."

Leopold drained the brandy in one gulp. Otis looked at him sadly. The bitterness in his master's words was unmistakable. Bitterness about and contempt for a world that wouldn't allow a man to follow his calling, not even in a supposedly free country like this. He bowed his head and withdrew.

After Leopold got out of the tub and put on his underwear, he entered his bedroom. In a corner, yet conspicuously visible, stood the model of an invention that had long preoccupied him: an elevator that would transport loads and people using electricity. His invention wasn't yet fully developed, but he was full of confidence, also regarding its significance. With an electric elevator, houses would be able to have many more floors than they currently possessed. The face of cities would inevitably change, and buildings would rise into the sky.

Maybe this will all remain a beautiful dream, he suddenly thought, and made himself another drink. Then he rang for Otis to help him get dressed.

Leopold examined himself in the mirror as if he were a stranger, while Otis and another servant pulled up his tight worsted trousers. Mercilessly, Otis buttoned the narrow collar and tied the bow tie. Finally, he held out the black brocade tailcoat, richly decorated with gold embroidery. Leopold slipped into it and let his gaze wander over his imposing figure in the mirror. His appearance was flawless and befitting his station. Ladies' hearts would inevitably race.

Leopold just raised his eyebrow. For his part, the guy was

in the mirror. But even though he was already bored by the marriage candidates he was about to be introduced to, he would play his role brilliantly—as always.

"Oh, Miss Blaine," he joked, tongue sluggish, the alcohol taking its effect, "you dance like a cow. You're

one of those rare ladies who can light up a room... by

You leave him." Leopold followed Otis's warning gaze and noticed that Uncle Millard, leaning on his cane, was standing in the doorway. Although, or perhaps because, his expression indicated that he disliked the mocking remark, Leopold continued: "You are, I hope, rich, Miss Blaine. You must know: I may be of aristocratic blood, but the little secret of my station, besides its utter uselessness, is that it is always up to its ears in debt."

Leopold looked provocatively at Millard. Millard stepped next to the model of the elevator and, looking at it, said, "It has always been a misfortune, Leopold, how much you delighted in the sound of your own voice."

"Isn't it a miracle that anything can bring me joy in such a dull life as mine?" Leopold replied. He took a step toward his invention and asked his uncle, who was just about to reach out for it:
"Please don't touch anything."

But Millard wouldn't let that stop him and pulled a lever. "Is that the device you're always babbling about?" he asked pointedly. "What's it supposed to do? To transport monks to their monastery towers?"

"To take everyone where they desire," said Leopold. His voice immediately became animated. "The buildings will grow, Uncle. Soon they will exceed the strength of our legs."

Millard chuckled to himself. But the hilarity was only superficial. While he was amused by his nephew's pathos, he was also deeply outraged that he was engaging in things that were completely out of character for his station. Millard hobbled across the room, stopped in front of Leopold, and adjusted his bow tie, even though there really hadn't been anything to improve.

"You talk about inventions and progress, Leopold," he said. "What I have to offer you is reality." His tone

became trusting, ingratiating. "Find yourself a woman. Get married."

Leopold's expression hardened. His uncle acted as if this were the simplest thing in the world. But they were probably talking about different things anyway. Uncle Millard meant a good match. In his eyes, love was of secondary importance, a bourgeois sentimentality. Love, at best, was the responsibility of a mistress, not a wife.

“Marriage is based on the promise of eternal love,” Leopold finally said.

"As a man of honor, I cannot promise for eternity what I have not felt for even a moment."

Millard dismissed his words with a dismissive wave of his hand. Lines of worry and disapproval appeared on his brow as he replied, "To be born with privilege and to be ashamed of it, that is your tragedy. It would break my brother's heart to see you like this. You are no count, Leopold."

"Of course not!" Leopold exclaimed. "The monarchy is dead. We are the remnants of a bygone era. That is the reality. The new nobility is intellectual and entrepreneurial. It includes men like Roebling with his bridge, Edison, Diesel, Bell, and Westinghouse."

Millard not only detested such speeches, he despised them, especially when they came from someone who hadn't accomplished anything in his life. The old man's irascibility, which made his staff tremble, didn't spare his nephew either. Completely unexpectedly, his hand shot out for a hard slap, leaving a reddened mark on Leopold's cheek.

"These men created something out of nothing," Millard exclaimed. "You, on the other hand, were born with everything. And what have you made of it? Nothing! As for you, I wash my hands of any guilt. I have only one piece of advice: take a close look at your dance card, Leopold. A wealthy bride is your only security."

With that, Millard turned away and hobbled out of

the room. Leopold stood motionless in shock before his invention. Was Uncle Millard right? Was he really a failure, and his invention a figment of his imagination with no future.

would be? Despair tried to take hold of him, but he fought it down, stepped before the mirror one last time to take a careful look at himself, and then left his bedroom.

From the ballroom, the music of a small orchestra drifted into the hall. Still overcome by gloomy thoughts, Leopold descended the stairs. Otis met him at the landing, pressed the dance card prepared by Uncle Millard into his hand, and then escorted him into the ballroom. Leopold felt more like a calf being led to the slaughter. Patiently, he worked through his dance card, concealing the desolation that filled his soul behind gallantry, the emptiness in his head behind empty conversation, which, however, usually died down after a few sentences. With relief, Leopold eventually realized that his undoubtedly winning appearance was enough for the Miss Minnies, Miss Claras, and Miss Bonnies. They pined after him, reveled in fantasies, some of which, in their unrestrainedness, would certainly have given offense.

The band played one waltz after another. Leopold, a consummate dancer, whirled his partners around the hall until they lost their senses, maintaining his composure even when his partner's elegance was no more than that of a dancing bear. More than once, Leopold came close to running screaming from the hall. But the constant gaze of his uncle on him stopped him.

As Leopold, with a strong drink in his hand—and how could he possibly handle all that without slowly but surely getting drunk?—was maneuvering a corpulent dancer across the dance floor, he noticed a man peering from the lobby through the open door into the hall. The odd thing was that he was looking through a small box with one eye. A kind of opera glasses? Leopold didn't think twice about it, recognizing the man as the stranger he had followed

to Brooklyn on Roebling's Bridge.

In an instant, he was sober. He let go of his dancer, who then staggered a little across the dance floor, pressed his glass into the hand of Otis, who was standing nearby, and hurried into the hall.

But the stranger was no longer there. Leopold just saw him disappear up the stairs. What was he doing here? Was he looking for something specific? This time he wouldn't let him escape. This time he would have to answer for his actions.

Leopold tiptoed upstairs. Noises came from his bedroom: a strange clicking sound, followed by a short buzzing sound. Leopold pushed the half-open door all the way open. The stranger seemed to have looked through his sketches, because the folders lay open, and was examining the elevator model through his strange device, which clicked and buzzed repeatedly.

Leopold entered. "So many dreams," he said, one of his sketches
considering, "but all are useless."

The stranger turned around and put his strange glass, which, as Leopold now saw, looked more like a small box, into his trouser pocket.

"You must tell me more about this automatic writing instrument," said the Count. "It is a novelty that certainly has a great future ahead of it."

Suddenly, the stranger leaped toward the door. The next moment, he was out and rushing down the stairs. Leopold followed him. The stranger had the element of surprise on his side, but Leopold quickly caught up. He would catch up with him in the hall at the latest.

Apparently, the pursued man recognized this as well. Therefore, he took the shorter route to the ballroom, apparently hoping to shake Leopold off among all the people. But Leopold wasn't deterred. Past an open-mouthed Otis and an even more dismayed Uncle Millard, who had almost dropped the glass of punch he had just grabbed, Leopold rushed after the stranger.

"Leopold!"a woman's voice sounded.

Leopold stopped. He didn't know the woman. She had short blonde hair, beautiful eyes, and was

wearing a strange dress that was completely out of fashion. She seemed out of breath, as if she'd been running. Why was she calling him as if she knew him? Even knew him very well?

Leopold tore himself away from the sight of her. He had hesitated a moment too long, because the stranger seized the moment and ran to the door. When Leopold gave chase, he was already in the hall, and a short time later, at the door.

But Leopold didn't give up. He followed him out. Heavy rain lashed his face. All he saw was the stranger jump into a cab, the driver's whip crack, and the vehicle start moving. By the time Leopold reached the road, it was already racing off at high speed.

Leopold frantically looked around for a cab. In vain. Instead, he spotted a horse tied up by the road. He quickly untied it, jumped on, and followed the carriage. The rain lashed his face. Lightning repeatedly lit up the night for a few seconds. Where is he going? Leopold thought. A short time later, he knew: the bridge.

Majestically defying wind and weather, the bridge tower stretched into the storm-swept night. It resembled the ruins of a Gothic cathedral. As Leopold arrived, he just saw the cab drive off as the stranger began to climb the scaffolding. Leopold jumped from his saddle.

"Just wait!" he called after him. No answer, but a flash of lightning brightly lit up the night.

Leopold also swung himself onto the scaffolding and climbed higher and higher. Nothing could stop him, as if his life depended on it. When he reached the end and stood at the beginning of one of the two Gothic arches, he saw the stranger a good distance ahead. Where was he going? It all made no sense.

But now was not the time for questions. Leopold hurried after him. Through a veil of rain, he saw the stranger suddenly stop. Then he suddenly disappeared around a corner. Where to? There was nothing there. Leopold feared the worst.

When he arrived at the spot where the man had

disappeared, he spotted him on one of the outlying beams where the bridge's iron girders were to be placed. He stared at something in his hand. A compass? Leopold climbed onto the narrow ledge, which the stranger must have also used to jump onto the shaky beam. His heart pounded with excitement.

up to their necks. Below them, the black waters of the East River drifted lazily.

Leopold held his breath and leaped boldly onto the beam, which, thrown off balance, swayed but then settled back into place. Only now did the stranger realize that his pursuer had already come so close. He turned to face him. His expression was filled with sheer horror, even panic.

"Stay where you are!" he shouted to Leopold. "Go back to your ball. You have no idea what you're doing!"

But Leopold was determined to save the man he believed to be committing suicide. "You mustn't do this!" he pleaded, while in the distance, through the patter of rain, the faint chiming of a church clock could be heard. Midnight.

The stranger pulled out a can. "Go away!" he shouted, his voice cracking. He seemed desperate. "I beg you. I don't want to hurt you."

"Stay calm," Leopold tried to calm him down. But the despair in the man's eyes seemed to grow with each chime of the church clock. When the final chime sounded, he turned away from Leopold. His intention was clear: he was about to jump. Right! But Leopold grabbed him by the arm with one hand, while the other grasped one of the ropes hanging from a scaffold.

"Let me go!" the man shouted, holding the can in Leopold's face. Leopold didn't know what was happening, because suddenly there was a hissing sound, and a blast of gas shot out of the can toward him. A violent burning sensation and tears followed. Leopold grabbed for something to hold on to, but only caught the stranger's arm. The stranger, however, had just pushed himself away and was on his way to the depths, where he would irrevocably take Leopold with him.

2

Bored, Kate McKay leaned against the exit of the suburban cinema. Only occasionally did her gaze stray to the screen, across which flickered one of those Hollywood love scenes, the kind that once again filled millions of moviegoers with dreams and expectations of their existence that real life could in no way live up to. Kate had long since gotten over that. The questions of whether the two would end up together—which wasn't really a question, which was where the whole lie began—didn't interest her. She was only interested in whether the men in the dark suits sitting in the back row of the cinema would be satisfied with their work in the end.

This movie night had been preceded by intensive preparation. Screeners representing the entire spectrum of the American moviegoing public had to be selected, dates had to be arranged, and a theater had to be rented. The work was only made easier by Kate's routine. Over the years, she had built up a database of "guinea pigs," as the test subjects were called at the agency, the size of which would have impressed even the CIA, which is why she was able to easily organize events like this, even at short notice.

Kate rolled her eyes as she saw the newly in love couple in

Plus-sized people walking through the rain, having pillow fights, eating pizza, and kissing each other all the time. She gently nudged her colleague and friend Darci in the side. "We have to," she whispered. "We only have five minutes."

Kate strode through the cinema foyer. The short, slightly chubby Darci struggled to keep up. "What do you mean?" she asked Kate when they reached the drinks and popcorn stand, where a few interns were

waiting for them. Darci, of course, meant the movie.

Kate just shrugged. "It'll work," she said, "with a few changes. The woman was unpleasant."

Darciraised his eyebrows in surprise. "I thought it was funny."

"Yes, but in a bitter way. Nobody likes someone like that."

"But I like you too."

Kate turned her head and looked at her, partly astonished, partly indignant. "Are you saying I'm bitter?"

Darci swallowed. Sure, she thought her friend was bitter, because wasn't a woman in her early thirties who, after a few—okay, quite a few—disappointments, wanted nothing more to do with love and romance bitter? Still, she would never have told her that, and so she answered Kate's question in the most sincere way. "I just wanted to say—"

Kate felt a thorn in her heart. Bitter, she thought for a moment, so people think I'm bitter. Am I bitter? "I'm disappointed," she contradicted Darci and the voice inside her. "Disappointed is three stages away from bitter. At least." She turned to a few interns who had been sitting drinking coffee but had now stood up and handed them pens and questionnaires.

Bitterly, it echoed in Kate's mind again a little later as she smoked a cigarette under the cinema's awning. It was pouring with rain. Gusts of wind repeatedly carried a few raindrops to the door, but Kate didn't even notice she was getting wet, because Darci's words didn't leave her alone.

Do I have reason to be bitter? she asked herself. Sure, she had a knack for always throwing herself at guys who shamelessly took advantage of her good nature, and the last such flop had been less than a month ago and had lasted five years. But hadn't she drawn a clear line under it? Didn't she have her whole life ahead of her? Thirty-two
– that wasn't old at all! Especially not for someone as dazzling as she was, with her blonde hair and perky blue eyes.

Besides, and this was the most important thing of

all, there were fortunately other things in a woman's life besides men. Her career, for example. If she continued like this, JJ might even make her his partner one day, not too far in the future. In any case, it was an open secret at the agency that

JJ was looking for a partner. So why shouldn't she hit the jackpot?

Kate flicked her cigarette into a puddle and returned to the theater. The lights had just come on in the auditorium, and the interns were busily distributing questionnaires and pens. She walked slowly down the aisle, her gaze wandering over the audience. She could sense a mood. It certainly wasn't euphoric. At the same time, she selected people for a focus group, which was interviewed immediately, so that the studio staff could get a preliminary result of the test screening that evening. Usually, the analysis of the questionnaires only confirmed this result.

Two of the producers approached Kate. They also didn't seem enthusiastic and seemed quite nervous. "How do you think the film was received?" asked one of them, Barry.

Kate made a hand gesture that meant "so-so-so." But "so-so-so" wasn't good enough, of course, when you'd invested millions of dollars in stars and production, which is why the two producers looked mildly dismayed. "The woman is unlikable," Kate explained coolly. The two men agreed. "We need to change the scene where she gets into bed with her boss," Barry suggested. "It would be best if we cut it out altogether."

"Excuse me?" a raspy voice sounded from behind her. The director himself. A man with curly hair, wearing an ill-fitting, wrinkled linen suit.
"What are you talking about?" He sounded concerned. When two producers put their heads together, it generally didn't mean anything good.

"We're talking about your film, Tony," Barry replied coolly. There was a hint of accusation in his voice.

Tony probably sensed that his female protagonist would be criticized. "I find Julie likeable," he defended her before anyone could object, "very likeable, in fact.

She's realistic." He turned to Kate. "Honestly, have you never slept with the wrong guy?"

Kate cleared her throat. "Excuse me?" At the same time, she asked herself: Have I ever slept with the right guy? Someone who didn't turn out to be a loser?

"I like you too, Ms. McKay," Tony continued undaunted. "Although you certainly haven't always led a perfect life."

"I'm not the main character in a movie that's supposed to be a blockbuster," Kate replied wittily.

The two producers laughed. They obviously knew the difference between a movie and reality. For them, it could be expressed in dollars. Tony, on the other hand, furrowed his brows and glared at Kate. His old resentment against the pollsters surfaced. Weren't they, with their supposedly representative audience surveys, responsible for Hollywood degenerating into an artistic wasteland where even the last germ of creativity was eradicated? "You and your tests," he exclaimed contemptuously.
"You suck the last bit of life out of everything."

Kate laughed. She knew she sounded arrogant. Somehow, she even enjoyed watching this poor wretch suffer. Where did he actually live? She wanted to see him suffer not for the disappointments life had brought her, but for the illusions that had been the real cause of those disappointments. As if a film like this could ever have anything to do with life. "You're the director," she said coldly. "You make the decisions." Then, with a nod of her chin, she indicated the audience busily filling out their questionnaires and said, "I'm just telling you what they think."

Tony's eyes flashed angrily. "So far, they haven't made a sound," he said sharply.

"That will change."

Kate beckoned Darci over and told her the people she had selected for the focus group. They were asked to sit in the front row. The other audience members had handed in their questionnaires and were

gradually leaving the theater. Kate asked the focus group all the questions again, but this time they voted by a show of hands.

"How many of you think the film you just saw was weak?" she asked. A good number of hands went up. Kate couldn't help but glance gleefully at the director, who was sitting a few rows back with the producers, whispering loudly to them. "Thank you," she said.

"Now I'd like to know why you didn't like the movie. What bothered you most?"

A middle-aged woman spoke up. "Actually, I like Julie Gönners," she said, "like in the movie where she lives with the gay guy. But here... I don't know..."

"She slept with too many guys," said a young man. "It took her the entire movie to figure out who was right for her."

Most people nodded in agreement. Only the director shook his head in disbelief.

"She seemed very bitter," one woman added.Exactly, thought Kate.

A short time later, Kate left the cinema with Darci in tow, her brow raised. Nevertheless, doubts gnawed at her inside, doubts she couldn't counter as easily as they could with Tony. Doubts about her work, doubts about herself. Perhaps that was precisely why she directed all her contempt at Tony: because a vague feeling told her there was more than a grain of truth in his accusation. On the taxi ride back to downtown Manhattan, the two women didn't speak for a long time, just stared out into the wall of rain, behind which the skyscrapers loomed vaguely. The scraping of the wipers on the windshield and the occasional crackle and hiss from the driver's radio were the only sounds.

"You suck the life out of everything," Kate finally repeated Tony's words. "What a whiner."

"Maybe he's not entirely wrong," Darci replied cautiously. She knew she was venturing into mined territory.

"Have you never had the feeling that what we do is a

little..."

Kate had also been looking out the window while she was talking. Now her head suddenly snapped around, her eyes flashing aggressively as she exclaimed, "What?"

Darci shifted restlessly in her seat. "Well... aren't we often... pretty cold... and harsh...?"

Darci had hit a nerve with that. Kate's cheeks flushed, her posture straightened, her voice taking on an increasingly aggressive tone as she retorted, "We just find out what normal people want and pass that knowledge on. Is that harsh? Or cold? Not if you ask me. We make peanut butter creamier, cornflakes crunchier, sitcoms funnier, and deadly boring movies shorter. We got Smuckers to take the seeds out of their strawberry jam. We're heroes! I guess it's inevitable that every now and then some conceited jerk will poke his head out of his cave and say, 'Hey, guys, I like the seeds in my strawberry jam. Without the seeds, it's just jelly. You guys are sucking the life out of my breakfast!' And you know what I say to people like that?" Kate gestured wildly, her whole body an explosive bundle. "I say, 'Son, you're just one percent of one percent. Your opinion is completely irrelevant. I dated a visionary like that for five years. I paid his rent for five years because he couldn't deign to look for decent work like the rest of us.'"

Darci had seen it coming and she already regretted having said anything at all, because when Kate was in that mood—and she had already noticed in the movies that she was in that mood again—every conversation would eventually end up with her ex-boyfriend.

"This isn't about Stuart," she objected weakly, but was overwhelmed by the verve of Kate's rant.

"Sorry for being in a business whose stated goal is to make people happy. Sorry for wanting to leave this island of concrete, steel, and glass one day. Sorry for wanting to make a life for myself!"

Darci sat silently and stared out the window. Kate also turned away and looked into the window as she had before her outburst.

Rain. Now that her anger had subsided, she felt only an emptiness inside her, not for the first time; an emptiness that frightened her.

The taxi dropped them off in front of her apartment building in SoHo. Their goodbyes to Darci were brief. They were both tired. In the elevator, Kate regretted the intensity with which she had spoken to Darci. She had been anything but confident. And wasn't confidence one of the most important characteristics of a prospective junior partner? She wished she hadn't also been a disappointed, hurt woman, showing signs of bitterness.

Suddenly, Kate was torn from her thoughts. The elevator jolted, and only emergency lighting illuminated the cabin. And that too. What should she do now? She didn't want to spend half the night in the elevator. The next moment, the lights came back on, and the doors opened. However, the elevator wasn't yet at the same level as the corridor. Kate sighed but climbed out of the cabin rather than wait for help.

Exhausted, she slammed the apartment door behind her. Home at last. She threw her shoulder bag into an armchair, shedding the last vestiges of her businesswoman facade. Now she was just the completely drained Kate McKay, disappointed with life and—yes, yes, quite bitter too. Kate swapped her pantsuit for a baggy sweatshirt that reached above her thighs and a comfortable bathrobe, ran a bath. Then she took her dinner—chicken chop suey—out of the microwave, turned on the TV, and flipped through the channels as she gobbled down the lukewarm stuff.

The Knicks game was about to end. Not that she was interested in basketball. Men's fascination with sports was completely foreign to her. But with one or two casual yet well-informed remarks, she would undoubtedly score points with JJ. So she was relieved to catch the final seconds of the game on the sports

channel. She hastily scribbled the sportscaster's closing remarks on a notepad.

Then she heard the barking of a dog from the apartment above her.

Dog's beard. Frowning, she stared up at the ceiling. Every footstep of the animal reached her clearly. This Stuart! Why couldn't he just leave her alone? Convinced that every expression of her ex-boyfriend's life had the sole purpose of bothering her, she was about to tell him what she thought once again when the footsteps and barking died away.

But not for long. Kate was lying in the bathtub – the first truly relaxing moment of this endlessly long day. – when she heard more noises from above. First a crash, as if something had fallen to the floor, then footsteps, and on top of all that, Bart's barking. Kate took the cucumber slices away from her eyes and stared at the ceiling. There was something else she heard. As if something was being dragged across the floor. What did that mean?

Kate got out of the tub, dried herself, and put on her bathrobe. She wondered what Stuart was up to now. She hurried out of the apartment—not through the front door, but via the fire escape. The old rusty iron creaked with every step, so she treaded carefully. It was still raining and wouldn't stop tonight. From a distance, she heard Bart barking and Stuart scolding him.

Her heart pounding with excitement, she dared to peer into Stuart's living room. A myriad of LEDs and displays blinked. What were these devices? The room looked like a massive control room. Was this another one of Stuart's strange inventions, the one he'd been babbling about without her ever understanding a word?

Kate watched as Stuart dragged Bart into the kitchen, which was no easy task, as Bart was a fully grown
A St. Bernard, the size of a calf. Only recently, Kate noticed someone lying on the sofa. Unfortunately, she couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman, as the person

had their back to her. Nevertheless, Kate was certain it was a woman. She wondered which bar Stuart had picked her up from.

Just then, Stuart returned from the kitchen. He walked straight toward the window. Kate quickly ducked her head. Her heart was beating so loudly she was afraid he might hear it. I hope he doesn't come out, she thought. She would have made a lovely picture, huddled up in her bathrobe, and on his balcony, no less. But luckily, Stuart just opened the window.

Kate's desire to witness Stuart's amorous whispers and other activities was limited. She already knew more than enough. So she seized the next opportunity to disappear.

3

Stuart stood at the window, breathing deeply into his lungs the damp night air. He felt a constant pounding in his temples. Presumably the aftereffects of the jump. Then he quickly turned around and looked at the man on the sofa. He was really lying there. If he hadn't been there, he probably would have thought the whole thing was a dream. But he was there!

Stuart approached him. The man was stuck in the no-man's-land between waking and sleeping, having been muttering to himself the whole time, mostly incomprehensibly. When Stuart touched his shoulder, he turned around. The rain had soaked his fine, tailored clothes. Stuart removed the silk tie from around his neck and loosened the top button of his shirt. Without opening his eyes, his guest even half-sat up, stretching his arms slightly, allowing Stuart to remove his gold-embroidered coat.

"I wanted to save him, Otis," he said dazedly, "but he cursed me for it and sprayed pepper in my eyes. With burning eyes, I fell into the water. His curses still ring in my ears."

Stuart felt himself regaining consciousness. His heart was pounding. He still couldn't believe it all. How could he? Before him sat his great-great-grandfather, Leopold Alexis Elijah Walker Gareth Thomas Mountbatten, the Earl of Albany. And now he opened his eyes, which were gradually stopping their tears, and gazed at his descendant, unsuspecting.

"Who are you?" he asked, surprised not to see his servant Otis in front of him.

"Stuart. My name is Stuart."

Leopold reached into a pocket of his velvet waistcoat and placed a gold coin on the table. "Have

your servant summon a cab," he said in his finest Oxford English. "Inform the company that the Count is indisposed..."

Which was absolutely true, because Leopold’s look

He veiled himself, rolled his eyes, and fell back into a faint. Stuart looked at the man lying there motionless. Goosebumps ran all over his body. Then Bart, who hadn't been able to stay in the kitchen, came over. He nudged Leopold with his wet, cold nose, then looked up at his master, whimpering.

Stuart remained motionless for a while. Then he realized that this should never have happened. Leopold shouldn't be here. He was needed in another time, desperately needed. If nothing else, he had to marry and have children. Because if he didn't, would he, Stuart, even exist? He was still there. But for how long? At any moment, he could fall out of the time continuum, as if he had never existed. And that was true: If he didn't correct the mistake, he would never have existed.

Cursing the paradoxes of the space-time continuum, Stuart picked up the phone. If anyone could offer advice, it was Swedish physicist Hans Reisendorf. After all, he had developed the theory that Stuart had used to travel through time. Years ago, Stuart had attended one of his seminars. He dug Reisendorf's groundbreaking book out of a pile of papers on his desk and dialed a phone number he had once written on the inside cover.

While Stuart was still wondering what time it was in Europe and whether he should get the poor professor out of bed, a voice rang out on the other end of the line. Unfortunately, it was just an answering machine.

"This is Stuart Besser," said Stuart. "I attended your space-time seminar at Columbia University in 1996, Mr. Reisendorf. You told me to call you when I was on the other side. Well, I was there. So answer the phone." Stuart waited a moment, reminding himself that the professor had meant it more as a

joke. Since no one answered, Reisendorf really wasn't there. Stuart urgently requested a call back, left his number, and hung up.

Perplexed, he paced the apartment, stopped, looked at Leopold on the sofa, and then moved on. Bart watched him, hardly less perplexed, though for different reasons. Finally, Stuart took a thick book from the shelf, a comprehensive reference work on the members of the English royal family, in which many original documents were printed. He opened it to a marked place.

The phone rang shrilly. Stuart jumped. Hope flared within him. He answered. "Hans?" he called excitedly into the receiver.

"My electronic planner," came a voice in his ear. "It's still lying around at your place."

Kate.

A disappointed sigh escaped Stuart. She kept calling, mostly with flimsy excuses, harassing him with jealous insinuations and accusations. Yet she was the one who had broken up with him a month ago, supposedly because he had no prospects and was wasting his life on idiotic ideas.

"Do you know what time it is?" Stuart asked, annoyed. Since he didn't know himself, he looked at his watch. Three in the morning.

"Obviously you're still up, so we can talk," came the snippy reply.

Stuart knew that tone from long, painful experience. It boded ill. Even if he had her appointment book, Kate wouldn't hang up until she'd told him everything that had bothered her about him during their five-year relationship. And that wasn't a small amount!

"I don't know where your digital calendar is," he said,
"And I don't have time for that right now. I'm expecting an important call."

Stuart hung up and turned back to the book. Everything was still the same. The old photo showing

Leopold next to the prototype of the elevator he had invented was still there. So the time continuum was still intact. But for how long?

The phone rang again. ExcitedStuart picked up. "Hans?"

"As you know, after a breakup, joint property is usually divided," Kate's voice came again, sounding even sharper, even more offended. "The only exception is a box of vacation pictures stored in a closet that represents something of a neutral zone. But at some point, the injured party has come to terms with the fact that the guy who supposedly has his arm around her in the pictures is actually a good-for-nothing succubus whose only accomplishment was hopelessly overdrawing her credit card account, lounging around in front of the TV all day, or chasing coeds."

Stuart had only been listening with one ear, casually rummaging through his scientific papers. But the last words were too hurtful to go unanswered. He was by no means the good-for-nothing she made him out to be. He had worked hard over the past few years. Otherwise, would he, of all people, have been able to make humanity's dream of time travel come true? "You'll regret what you just said," he countered Kate.

"Oh. And why should I?" came the snippy reply.

"Because I made a big breakthrough."

He slammed the receiver down. A short while later, Bart, who had since settled down, jumped up, as unexpectedly as seemingly for no reason, and began to whimper in pain. At first, Stuart didn't understand what was happening. But then he remembered that Kate still had one of those electronic devices that could send a small electric shock to Bart's collar via radio, making him stop barking. Apparently, she had decided to terrorize him all night. Stuart took the St. Bernard's collar off, thus putting an end to the nightmare.

At the same time, Leopold tossed and turned restlessly in his sleep, groaning and muttering incomprehensible things, as if he were experiencing a

nightmare.

Then the phone rang again. Kate again. Was she trying to drive him crazy? "Please stop it, Kate," he said.

"II have someone here."

"I know. I saw her."

Stuart understood. She thought he had a wife here, and she was burning with jealousy. Under other circumstances, that might have given him some inner satisfaction, but now he just wanted to be left alone. "It's a he, if that makes you feel any better," he said, unable to suppress a certain condescension. "So, since you know I'm not sleeping with anyone else tonight, you can go to sleep in peace." He slammed the receiver down.

If Stuart had thought Kate was now satisfied, he had miscalculated. Quite the opposite. Her curiosity was now even more piqued. That's why the doorbell rang again. At first, Stuart tried to evade her questions about the origins of the man on his couch and the circumstances of their encounter, resorting to general phrases like, "Something special happened" or, "This gives my life meaning," which, of course, only increased Kate's curiosity. Finally, Stuart saw no other option than to tell her the truth.

"I found a crack in the fabric of time, Kate," he confessed.

"It's located over the East River. A portal that leads exactly to April 28, 1876. I jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge today and walked in 1876. I followed my great-great-grandfather through the streets of old New York. Are you listening?"

"And how."

"Now comes the problem. He followed me home."

Stunned silence on the line. "Your great-great-grandfather, who

Viscount of Buffalo followed you home through a rift in time," she repeated, apparently unsure whether to laugh out loud or call a doctor immediately.

"He's the Earl of Albany," Stuart corrected, "Albany in England. I told you about him. He was a brilliant engineer and patented the elevator that works with counterweights. He invented the form of elevator we

use today!"

Once again, there was a long silence from Kate. She seemed to be thinking. Of course, Stuart knew how adventurous this story must sound to her. On the other hand, he had

He'd been talking about his plan for years, and this was essentially just the fulfillment. But presumably their imagination isn't strong enough to accept something that doesn't correspond to their limited everyday ideas, he thought.

Stuart was right. Kate's imagination wasn't nearly enough. Yet she certainly had an imagination. "We haven't been together for a month, Stuart," she finally said, "so you can tell me the truth. You picked up a transvestite in Times Square, didn't you?"

Stuart breathed a sigh of disappointment. Didn't her behavior show what they had both ultimately failed at? She had never trusted him, never believed in him. He wondered how she could have fallen in love with him if she had thought he was a nutcase all along. Since the truth obviously didn't satisfy her, and he finally wanted some peace and quiet to get at least a little sleep, he gave in and told her the lie she so desperately wanted.

"He's a computer hacker, an Englishman," he said. "I met him at university; he's in town for a short time. We drank a few too many Guinnesses, so he fell asleep on my couch. Are you happy with that? Is that plausible enough for you and your limited focus group brain?"

Another long silence. Stuart heard Kate breathing. Her anger and jealousy had dissipated. She sounded hurt and disappointed when, after a while, she said, "I wasted my best years on you, Stuart."

"If these were your best years," he said, knowing full well how cruel that was. He didn't enjoy it, but he couldn't help it. He was tired of being blamed for all the misfortunes in her life.

"Good night," he said, and: "I'm sorry."

Kate hung up. Sad and hurt. She clutched her pillow. Don't cry, she thought. Absolutely not. Was Stuart right? Had she really never believed in him?

Had they both really failed at this?

Of course she hadn't believed in him! How could she have believed in someone who talked about time travel? She was a

Rational woman. No, that wasn't what had ruined their relationship. Stuart had been incapable of leading a regular life. If he'd at least been an artist, she might have been able to tolerate that. But as it was, he was just one of those crazy professors you saw in cheap horror movies.

Suddenly, she heard the sound of a piano coming from Stuart's apartment. Eric Satie. She had always loved it when Stuart played the piano. That's why, after their breakup, she had threatened to call the police at the slightest sound from upstairs if he didn't stop immediately. This time, she didn't. And there it was, the tear she had wanted to avoid. She quickly wiped it away.

Do I still love him? she asked herself. There was still some feeling for him, but was it love? She wasn't sure. At the very least, it was enough to make her angry and jealous. But maybe she wasn't jealous at all, just envious. She wouldn't have been able to bear it if he had started a new relationship while she had nothing to show for it except her bitterness.

Kate felt she could no longer bear it all. The photos on her dresser of her laughing as a young girl with pigtails
between her parents. Back then, she had still been full of hope and expectations. Had she ever laughed so freely since then? She couldn't stand the music from upstairs either. She pressed the pillow to her head just to stop hearing it. She couldn't stand her whole life anymore, which at that moment she felt had failed from the ground up.

But that would pass. It was just a mood. A mood that many single women who had decided to pursue a career probably experienced from time to time. A temporary low. The sun would shine again tomorrow morning, and Kate would remember this night only as a vague dream.

4

Leopold opened his eyes. The morning sun filtered through the curtains. He lifted his head with difficulty, feeling even worse than after a night of heavy drinking. And evidently, the intoxication wasn't over, because what he saw around him couldn't possibly be reality. What were those strange devices with flashing lights? Objects he'd never seen before. There was no doubt about it: he'd awoken in the middle of a fever dream.

"Otis," he called, "bring me medicine. Preferably anything you can get your hands on."

Only now did Leopold sit up fully. A box full of small buttons fell into his hands, lying between the pillows. Intrigued, he pressed one of the buttons. Suddenly, as if by magic, figures appeared in a box at the other end of the room that seemed so natural they couldn't possibly have been painted. And as if that weren't enough, they were also moving and talking to each other!

Leopold's heart began to race with shock, and at the same time, fear gripped him. Yet he was too much of an explorer not to try out what else the black box had to offer. So he pressed another button. Suddenly, a hellish noise blared through the room. Horrified, Leopold jumped up and covered his ears. Although the noise contained rhythmic elements, even melodies and singing—"I can't get no satisfaction," roared an obviously tormented soul—Leopold would never have dared to call it music, for it defied all cultivated taste.

He was also being barked at wildly from the side. At least the animal, a St. Bernard, was real, or so it seemed, although Leopold began to doubt his sanity, for it dawned on him that this might not be a dream after all. Desperately, he called for Otis, for medicine,

for a doctor. His cries for help went unanswered.

Leopold feared for his life. He had to escape this hell, even at the risk of being torn to pieces by a barking Cerberus. He ran to the door, but found it locked. So he ran to one of the windows, tore open the curtains, and froze in horror and amazement.

Where on earth had they taken him? He'd never heard of a city like this, where the houses rose hundreds of meters high like Babylonian towers. Was he even still on earth? Or was he perhaps dead? Trapped in an in-between world? He, who was completely devoted to scientific thought, was on the verge of believing things were possible that he would have laughed at just a short while ago.

Suddenly, the noise stopped; someone silenced the dog with a word. Leopold turned around. The stranger he had followed to the bridge tower stood before him. Then he remembered. He had jumped into the East River with him. He didn't remember anything else.

"Where am I?" asked Leopold, pointing at the towers.

"It's not that easy to explain."

"If you're looking for a ransom, sir," Leopold said coolly, folding his arms across his chest, "then let me tell you: my uncle won't pay a cent. Unfortunately, I still don't seem to be able to see clearly because of the gas you sprayed in my eyes. So I ask you again: Where am I?"

"Please sit down first."Leopold hesitated.

"Believe me, it's better this way." Leopold reluctantly sat down.

"My name is Stuart Besser." That was the only thing Leopold was capable of believing. The rest sounded far too far-fetched. What should he make of the time travel and strange devices, the theories and time portals the man told him about? This man had to

be a madman, an escapee from an asylum, capable of far worse than kidnapping.

"So you want to make me believe that I am in the future,"Leopold asked, balancing on a fine line between laughter and tears, "in a time that will come long after me?"

Stuartnodded.

"And you want to be my descendant, the distant offspring of a marriage I'm yet to enter into? You want me to believe you found a crack in time through which you slipped from one century to another?"

"At least you, as a scientist, should be unbiased," Stuart replied. "You're an engineer. You invented the elevator."

Leopold's excitement grew. "What are you talking about? What is an elevator? So finally tell me where I am!" he pleaded.

"In New York City. I told you so."

Leopold jumped up and pointed out the window, his hand outstretched, toward the towers that seemed to stretch into the sky. "This, sir, isn't New York!" he insisted.

"I'm afraid so," came a voice from the window.

Leopold turned around. Standing at the open window was a young woman who seemed somehow familiar. Since he had never met her before—could never have met her, if this man's story was true—she must have reminded him of someone.

Kate, of course, hadn't missed the noise in the apartment above her. First the television, then the blaring stereo, Bart's barking, hurried footsteps. Last night, with all its emotional turmoil, lay behind a veil of fog on this bright morning; she remembered it only as an unpleasant dream. Today, she was once again the ambitious, cool businesswoman who would soon be offered a junior partnership.

Nevertheless, she was burning with curiosity to find out who had stayed in Stuart's apartment. She still harbored a faint doubt that it might not have been

a woman. Therefore, she was somewhat relieved when she saw this strangely dressed, otherwise

but dazzling looking young Man in Stuarts apartment.

"HowWhat's your name?" she asked.

"Leopold."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Kate. So you know Stu from university. Or maybe you've arrived from the past?" She quickly examined his outfit. "Or are you Sgt. Pepper? There's a certain resemblance, Lionel, I must admit."

Leopold looked at her perplexed. "He claims I'm his ancestor," he said, pointing at Stuart.

Kate frowned. I see, she thought, the two of them had a deal. Does Stu seriously think anyone would buy his story?

"Can we have a little privacy?" Stuart asked angrily, went to the window, closed it, and drew the curtains.

Kate rapped violently on the window. "I want my electronic planner!" she shouted.

As Bart started barking, Stuart ran into his bedroom and retrieved the planner Kate had left at his place, which he hadn't yet returned, so she would have a reason to call him. Since their breakup, they'd been playing this game, staging seemingly random encounters and pretending to be extremely uncomfortable.

"Who is that woman?" asked Leopold, who followed him like his shadow. "She seems somehow—"

"Women have changed in the last hundred years," Stuart said simply, putting the hand-sized diary into an envelope. "They've become a danger."

With that, he ran back into the living room. Since Kate had already disappeared downstairs, he simply threw the envelope containing the calendar onto her balcony.

"You said this wasn't a kidnapping," he said now. "Then why did you lock the door?"

Stuart put his arms on his hips. Leopold had tried to leave the apartment. "With all due respect, Leopold,"

said Stuart, trying to sound serious but not threatening, "I can't just let you run around out there. People would hurt you. They'd think you escaped from an insane asylum."

Leopold's gaze fell to the ground, heavy as lead. For the first time, he seemed to consider that Stuart's story might actually be true. He realized what this meant for him: The people he knew, the world he had lived in, no longer existed. He was completely alone.

Stuart placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I understand your fear. That's perfectly normal. But I promise you: I will bring you home again. The portal opens again next Monday. That was my backup date in case I hadn't been able to get back last night. It opens cyclically, you see. Every twenty-five years. Do you understand?"

"I usually understand everything," Leopold replied. "Since I
But I haven't encountered anything at all. I'm either trapped in a nightmare—or dead."

At that moment, Bart started barking again. He couldn't be calmed down because he desperately needed his morning walk.

While Stuart went into the kitchen to get coffee, Leopold flopped down on the couch. His thoughts raced behind his forehead. What was to be made of this adventurous story? Two things could be considered certain: He was neither dead nor in a dream. Everything was too real for that. But what about that city outside the window?

Stuart returned not only with a cup of coffee, but also with a stack of loose papers, notebooks, and folders. They contained Stuart's notes from Reisendorf's seminar, his own calculations, and theories. He asked Leopold to look through them. "Perhaps then you'll understand more." Then he put the leash on Bart and disappeared, but not without

locking the door from the outside.

Satisfied with himself, Stuart stepped to the elevator and pressed the button. In his pocket he still had the film he had

he had photographed on his journey into the past. The images would be the sensation of the year and not only make him rich, but also open the doors to universities around the world. Honorary doctorates, awards, a reception at the White House.
"The Nobel Prize is my for sure," said Stuart, looking at Bart as the elevator doors opened.

Still facing Bart, Stuart took a step forward. By the time he realized something was wrong, it was already too late. He stepped into the void, falling like a stone into the blackness of the elevator shaft. And there was no time to wonder where the elevator had gone. His fall was halted abruptly. Only then did Stuart realize he was hanging on the dog's leash. With all four limbs, Bart braced himself against being pulled into the abyss by his master's weight. It was a fight for inches, a fight that Bart and Stuart would lose. Stuart's cries for help went unheard.

Bart's canine loyalty, however, had its limits. And he was inching closer to one of those limits. The St. Bernard lowered his massive head. His collar slipped lower and lower, over his neck, his ears, his head. Just as the elevator doors closed, Bart had completely slipped off the leash.

Stuart sank further, but his fall was broken again. The collar had become caught between the doors. Hope began to grow within him. But how would he free himself from this situation? He was spared the need to answer this question, for with a violent jerk, the collar was pulled through the slot. Stuart fell inexorably into the depths, five stories below…

Stupefied, Leopold leafed through Stuart's documents. But all the inscrutable algorithms and equations brought no clarity; on the contrary, they only increased his confusion. One folder contained newspaper clippings and photographs, many of them

in color. In one, Leopold glimpsed Roebling's bridge in its finished state, taken from the air (perhaps from a balloon?). It looked majestic. He admired

also the quality of the photography, whose colors appeared completely natural.

A ringing startled Leopold. It didn't come from the door, but from the middle of the room. After a beep, he heard a woman's voice, her English containing a heavy, presumably Swedish accent. "This is Margo Reisendorf. You can save yourself any more calls. Hans has been dead for two years." The woman fell silent.

Leopold stood up. He went into every room, searching for the mysterious woman. But he was alone. The bathroom caught his attention. What a strange toilet. What was the knob for? Leopold pulled it. A loud whooshing noise began. He jumped back in alarm, but then immediately ventured forward again. The toilet filled with water again.
"Fascinating," he murmured admiringly and tried it again.

Then he noticed the many strange things in front of the mirror. He grabbed a can on which
"Shaving Foam" was written on it. A series of illustrations showed its use. Leopold shook and pressed a valve on top, and a stream of shaving foam shot across the bathroom. How convenient, he thought, rubbing his chin. He could have certainly used a shave.

Leopold had just finished shaving when there was a loud knock at the door. "Stuart! The planner comes with a pen! Give it to me!" It was undoubtedly the woman from before, this Kate. A little later, the door was unlocked—so she had a key, which suggested a very close acquaintance—and Kate stood in the apartment.

Leopold hastily buttoned his shirt. Kate looked at him attentively, with a certain pleasure, as was easily evident in her expression. Leopold also examined her. He found her pretty, but her outfit—a sweater and

men's trousers—was unladylike.

"I was warned about you," he said.

Kate raised her eyebrows, an amused expression came over her

Face. The corners of her mouth curled, dimples appeared on her cheeks. "You have that," she said.

"And what did the biggest disappointment of my life say about me?"

"That you're dangerous." Leopold smiled cautiously and added after a pause, "Even if you don't look it."

"You don't say, Lionel."

"A woman in trousers isn't dangerous. She just looks unflattering. You're probably one of those working women."

"Indeed," Kate replied, offended. "Market research."

"An activity that seems to me to be in keeping with the female nature."

Kate laughed out loud. How exquisitely he expressed himself. These Englishmen are all fine fellows, she thought. But that doesn't change the fact that he's a macho. She began searching the apartment for her pen, ignoring Leopold. Finally, she found what she was looking for on Stuart's desk.

"I can't shake the feeling we've met before," Leopold said. Although Stuart had warned him about her, he felt sympathy for Kate.

But she retorted sharply, "Since I've never met any of Stuart's friends—and frankly, I didn't even know he had any—we couldn't have met." With that, she left him standing there. A little later, the door slammed shut.

Leopold remained thoughtful and a little confused. This woman fascinated him, especially because of her prickliness. He had just put on his skirt and boots when the door burst open again and Kate dragged Bart in, looking at Leopold reproachfully. "He made a huge puddle out there," she said. "You can't just throw him out into the hallway and call it a day."

While Leopold stood there dumbfounded, Kate put a leash on the St. Bernard and pressed the other end into Leopold's hand. Then she turned and headed

toward the elevator.

Leopold continued to stand rooted to the spot, she urged him:
"What are you waiting for? Let's go!"

Leopold followed her hesitantly. He remembered Stuart's warning. On the other hand, he was far too curious about this strange new world to stay in Stuart's apartment any longer.

Since the elevator wasn't working, Kate and Leopold took the stairs. Bart seemed to have only relieved his strongest urge in the hallway, as he tugged vigorously on the leash while panting ahead of them.

In the lobby, doorman Gracy apologized for the elevator malfunction, which he couldn't explain. Kate retrieved the mail from her mailbox. After sifting through the letters, she stepped out onto the street, ignoring Leopold.

Leopold had barely stepped outside when he stopped as if struck by lightning. The next moment, he leaped backward, bumping into a passerby. The passerby didn't even take the time to accept Leopold's apology but, barking a rude remark, immediately moved on. Leopold's heart was racing. He had never seen so many people! And what a noise! What an unpleasant stench! He watched in amazement as the countless tin vehicles moved down the streets, leaving stinking clouds behind them. Since they weren't harnessed to any draft animals, he wondered what powered them. A steam engine? Colorful lights seemed to direct the traffic.

*Broadway,*Leopold read on a sign. So Stuart hadn't lied to him. This was New York. Then the rest of his statement was probably true too: Leopold was in another time. A strange feeling came over him, a mixture of horror and fascination.

Meanwhile, Kate had gone through her mail. She threw most of the envelopes unopened into the

nearest trash can. The postman had mistakenly put Stuart's credit card statement in her mailbox. That was no longer her responsibility. It gave her deep satisfaction to slip it into Leopold's coat pocket. Then she briefly described the route.

to a green area where Bart could do his business. "Have a nice day," she said, jumped into a taxi she had just hailed, and was gone.

Bart seemed to know the way to the green. He tugged on the leash and turned the right way at the corner Kate had described. But then he stopped abruptly because he had noticed a female Afghan Hound on the opposite side of the street, giving him meaningful glances while her owner bought a magazine at a kiosk.

Leopold, too, had stopped, transfixed—not because of the dog, but because something in a shop window caught his attention. Amidst numerous devices whose function he could only puzzle over, he discovered his own reflection. It followed his every move like a mirror image, but the one before him wasn't a mirror. He soon realized that this image was being captured by the lens of a photographic camera and projected onto the screen in strange ways. A world full of wonders, it was!

But Leopold had no time to continue marveling at the wonders, because suddenly he felt a tug on the dog's leash. Bart had
spontaneously decided to pay his respects to the dog lady and dragged the surprised Leopold into the middle of the busy street.

Horns blared, brakes squealed. The drivers rolled down their windows and shouted vicious insults. Leopold, who now had Bart under control again, apologized to everyone, albeit extremely indignant at the coarse language with which these uncouth people dared to insult the ear of a nobleman.

Leopold and Bart now walked briskly toward Battery Park. After the stench in the streets, the fresh sea air blowing in from the open ocean was a relief. While Bart was doing his business, Leopold turned away, embarrassed, and looked alternately out to sea

and at the towering buildings on the other side.

"I hope you don't leave this lying around," said a female voice behind him.

Leopold turned around. Standing before him was a powerfully built woman in a police uniform. He looked at her perplexed, having no idea what she wanted from him. She pointed with her baton at the considerable pile Bart had left behind. "Pick this up and throw it in a trash can," she demanded brusquely.

Leopold assumed a perfectly erect posture and looked at the policewoman with a mixture of indignation and condescension. He, a count and member of the royal family, was supposed to clean up dog poop? Even these times couldn't be that barbaric. "I certainly won't do that," he protested.

"So you want to break the law?" she replied, glaring at him from under furrowed brows.

"Are you suggesting, Madam, that there is a law requiring a gentleman to clean up after a dog?" Leopold asked, stunned.

"You pick up the dog poop and throw it away, immediately!"

Leopold crossed his arms. "With all due respect, I won't do that!"

"As you wish." The policewoman didn't pull out her baton or gun, as Leopold had feared, but a notepad. "Name?"

"Leopold Alexis Elijah Walker Gareth Thomas Mountbattan."

"Your name, not your family tree," the policewoman replied. Then she noticed the envelope addressed to Stuart in Leopold's tailcoat pocket. She simply wrote the name on it and handed Leopold a copy of the ticket. "Have a nice day, Stuart," she said and left.

Still embarrassed by this incident, Leopold and Bart took a short stroll along the water. Suddenly, he stopped because he noticed something that almost took his breath away. What was towering above the houses—that had to be Roebling's Bridge to Brooklyn!

"Come on, Bart," he said, quickening his pace, "let's

take a look."

5

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Pure coincidence? All the elevators in the building of MRG Research, the market research firm where Kate worked, were also out of service. On this day, of all days, Kate was already running late. Amidst an army of office workers who populated the skyscraper during the day like termites in their burrow, she struggled up the stairs, making her first phone calls on her cell phone. When she entered the office, she found Darci, like every morning, poring over one of her pulp novels.

"WhatWhat's going on with the elevators?" Kate wanted to know.

"Out of order," Darci replied, without looking up from her book, on the last pages of which she was. "All over town. Just came on the news."

Strange, thought Kate. A power outage certainly couldn't be the cause, because all the other technical devices seemed to be working perfectly. Maybe some kind of elevator virus, she thought.

"When will they finally be at the altar?" Kate asked impatiently, because Darci didn't seem to be stopping her reading until she had devoured the last line. In fact, she continued reading nonchalantly, finally sighing with relief and closing the book.

"AnyCalls?" asked Kate.

Darci looked at her notepad. "The results from yesterday's test screening are in. I left them on your desk," Darci announced. "The meeting with the film people is at four. The meeting about the margarine case will be in the conference room at three. JJ wants to see you beforehand."

Kate's expression had already darkened at the mention of JJ. When would Darci finally learn to

distinguish important things from unimportant ones and, above all, act accordingly? Only Kate's high level of self-control prevented her from throwing a tantrum.

"Look at me, Darci," she said, sternly, but otherwise

completely calm. "Why am I angry now?"

Darci put her index finger to her lip and thought hard, thought for a long time, unbearably long. Finally, she shrugged. "I don't know, Kate."

"JJ called this morning!" Kate blurted out, a little sharper than before. "Instead of calling me right away, you kept reading about Lord Montague and the stable maid with the giant melons. You're supposed to —"

"But he didn't call," Darci replied with what seemed like childlike innocence. "He just poked his head in and said a few words."

Kate just couldn't believe it. JJ was already back! And Darci didn't think it was necessary to tell her. The most sobering part, though, was: There was no point in blaming Darci. She was completely incapable of learning. If she hadn't been a friend, Kate would have fired her long ago.

Kate hastily took her mirror out of her purse and checked her appearance. For JJ, she had to be perfect. She knew his weakness for young women. She didn't really like the idea of impressing him with her looks. But since her performance was fine, she had nothing to blame herself for. That was just the way things were. She hadn't made the rules; she just wanted to use them while they were in her favor.

"Margo from PR said JJ will be giving a speech about the merger next week," Darci shared.
meanwhilewith.

"What did JJ say when he poked his head in?" Kate wanted to know as she fixed her hair. "Every word, do you hear?"

"He said, 'Can you ask Kate if she wouldn't mind if I joined the meeting with the Farmer's Bounty people?'"

Kate flinched. That wasn't Darci's voice. It was a man's voice she knew very well. She looked around and blushed. JJ, a graying man of advanced age,

leaned casually in the doorway, well aware of his sex appeal, and regarded Kate with obvious pleasure. How long had he been standing there? In her mind, she quickly ran through

what she and Darci had talked about in the last few minutes. Nothing incriminating. Thank God!

"Good morning, JJ," Kate greeted, quickly regaining her composure. "Too bad the Knicks didn't score the three points last night," she said.

"You saw the game?" asked JJastonished.

Kate didn't respond (she would never have been able to prove JJ's point), but instead doubled down. "The Knicks simply can't compensate for Ewing's absence," she said, not boastfully, but casually. She hoped JJ wouldn't ramble on, because she was completely exhausted by what she'd just heard yesterday's commentary.

Kate was lucky. JJ just nodded in agreement, said, "See you at the meeting," and left the office. Kate breathed a sigh of relief. For now. It was obvious:
JJ had at least one eye on her, probably both of them—one on Kate, the capable, ambitious employee, and the other on Kate, the blossoming young woman. A queasy feeling spread in her stomach. Did she have reason to be happy—or to run away?

Leopold was still under the impression of what he had just seen. Roebling's bridge, in its finished state, exceeded all his expectations. He was filled with pride. His time had not only left behind an impressive structure, it still fulfilled its function even after more than a hundred years. Leopold certainly wouldn't have found his way back alone. But he could confidently rely on Bart's guidance. The St. Bernard pulled him along, taking advantage of the fact that he could take the occasional detour undisturbed to follow a particularly tempting scent trail.

When the man and dog finally turned into Stuart's street, they stopped in amazement. In front of the house were cars with flashing lights, ambulances, as Leopold immediately and correctly concluded. Gracy,

the doorman, immediately approached Leopold. Completely beside himself, he reported that he had found Stuart in the elevator shaft.

"It's a miracle he's still alive," the man kept saying, dabbing the sweat from his forehead.

At that moment, Stuart was brought out on a stretcher. When he saw Leopold, his eyes widened in astonishment. He reached out for him, but couldn't say anything more as one of the paramedics placed an oxygen mask over his face. Immediately afterward, he was pushed into the car, heavy doors slammed shut, and a short time later, the ambulance drove off with blaring sirens, to City Hospital, as the porter told Leopold.

Poor Stuart, Leopold kept thinking as he climbed the stairs with Bart. Gracy had given him Stuart's keys, which he had found in the shaft next to the injured man. Once back at the apartment, Leopold rested from his walk and even slept for a while until hunger struck. He entered the kitchen and opened a cupboard door. He raised his eyebrows in surprise. Cold air rushed out from inside the cupboard. Perishable goods were obviously stored there. He remembered a man he knew slightly who had also worked on such a machine. But it was nothing compared to what Leopold saw before him.

While he was examining the somewhat mysterious contents of the refrigerator, the doorbell rang in the living room. But only when he heard Stuart's voice did Leopold prick up his ears and go next door. There was no sign of Stuart. Could people in this century perhaps make themselves invisible?

"Don't be afraid, Leopold," Stuart said, "I'm speaking from a machine called an answering machine, and what you just heard was my message. You must pick up the green receiver, then we can speak."

Leopold followed the sound of the voice. It came from a box placed on top of the piano. It was a talking telegraph, he thought, fascinated. He remembered

seeing the prototype at a trade fair.

"Take the green receiver and hold it to your ear!" Stuart urged him again, even more urgently than

before.

Then Leopold spotted the receiver Stuart presumably meant. He picked it up and held it to his ear. "Can you hear me, Stuart?" he asked uncertainly into the receiver.

"Leopold! Thank God!" came a relieved voice from the receiver. "I can't talk much longer because they're taking me for an X-ray. I just wanted to tell you that everything will be fine. You mustn't leave the apartment under any circumstances."

Leopold couldn't stop marveling. He heard Stuart's voice so clearly, as if he were standing next to him. It was like a miracle.

"Stay in the apartment under all circumstances," Stuart repeated his words urgently. "I'll be back tonight, I promise. And I'll bring you back on Monday. So don't do anything—"

Leopold heard someone interrupting, and Stuart got into an argument with that person. A short time later, something clicked and all the voices disappeared. "Stuart!" Leopold called out repeatedly. But he received no response. So he put the receiver down, not on the hook, but on the table next to it.

Because his conversation with Stuart had completely absorbed his attention, he hadn't noticed that a boy of about ten had entered the apartment, taken a bag of chips from a cupboard, and thrown himself onto the sofa. Only when he turned on the television did Leopold wake up.

"Hi," the boy simply said. He seemed to feel completely at home here. He had given the man in the strange outfit a quick glance—there were too many crazy people in New York running around in all sorts of clothes—and then turned to the television, which his eyes wouldn't leave, even when he was talking to Leopold. "Where's Stuart?" he wanted to know.

"Unfortunately, he's...unavailable," replied

Leopold, who still didn't know what to make of this visitor.
"Who are you?" "Hector. My mom works on Wednesdays, so I always watch the Power Rangers with Stuart. Chips?"

He held the bag out to Leopold. Leopold looked at him uncertainly for a moment. "Why not?" he thought, and sat down next to the boy on the couch.

Kate was at her best. She felt it. She enjoyed it. And JJ, who held back during the meeting but observed everything all the more attentively, saw it too. The campaign for Farmer's Bounty, a margarine that was about to be relaunched, wasn't just about big money. The agency's prestige was also at stake. If the campaign were a success, it would also strengthen MRG's negotiating position in the upcoming merger.

A few test spots had already been shot, but none met Kate's critical eye. None of the actors were convincing. Pacing in front of the others, Kate read out the devastating results of the test screenings like death sentences.
"Shady," "no sex appeal," "creepy" - she eliminated one candidate after another in this way.

Phil, who was responsible for casting and producing the spot, wanted to tear his hair out. Where would he find someone so quickly? Someone better than those who had auditioned so far. "The spot is scheduled to launch nationwide in four days," he said, outwardly calm but inwardly seething. "The product is shipping."

Kate just shrugged. "We'll have to try again tomorrow. I've had my assistant make the necessary bookings."

JJ smiled contentedly. Even under pressure, Kate remained calm and focused. He couldn't have asked for a better junior partner.

At that moment, Darci appeared behind the glass that closed off the conference room at the back. Only Kate, who was on her way to her seat, could see her. Darci held up a piece of paper on which she had written: "Stuart called! It's an emergency!"

This interruption threw Kate. What was wrong with

Stuart? Had something happened to him? On the other hand, it was always an emergency with him; the man was a complete emergency.

Thoughts, Kate missed her chair as she tried to sit down and not only landed unladily on the floor, but also knocked her cup off the table. A latte spilled onto her sweater, leaving an unmistakable stain.

Everyone immediately jumped to their feet to help Kate up. Phil was the first to reach her and offered her his hand. Kate felt like sinking into the ground with shame. She knew the only way out of a situation like this was with humor. But she couldn't think of anything. Nothing, except a few crude curses that would have astonished even a dockworker, and which she'd better keep to herself.

Luckily the meeting was over.

With her head held high, but feeling deeply shaken inside, Kate returned to her office. Darci tried to comfort her. Kate, however, waved her off, trying to recall JJ's expression the whole time. Had he been smirking? Did he perhaps think she was too clumsy to represent the agency externally as a junior partner? This thought completely forgot Darci's message about Stuart.

To her surprise, a short time later, a delivery man from Barney's brought a package containing a cashmere sweater, undoubtedly from JJ. Kate put it on immediately. Not only did it feel wonderfully soft, it also boosted Kate's self-confidence.

She immediately went to thank JJ for the kind gesture. He seemed to have been expecting her and asked her to sit down. Everything was so grand here: the view, the desk, even the plants. Somehow, Kate admired JJ. He was a man who always looked out for his own advantage, both in business and with women. She had always thought only of the well-being of others and far too often forgot her own goals. After JJ had said a few general words of praise for Kate's work, he suddenly asked, "What's wrong with you, Kate?"

Kate swallowed. What did he mean by that? Since she didn't answer right away, he continued, "Not that it would surprise me. You've always worked hard. But lately, you've been bubbling with energy. Where does that come from?"

Kate avoided his gaze. She wasn't sure how exactly he really wanted to know. "I've changed a few things in my life in the last month," she finally said vaguely. "And I just tried hard..."

"It's more than that," JJ replied. "There aren't many women like you, Kate. You have no illusions. You don't let your feelings control you. You don't put on a show."

"No?" Kate asked, a little uncertainly. She didn't know if those were compliments. Somehow, it didn't sound like one.

"You understand men. You're like one yourself. Like a man who understands women. Their desires. Their needs. You understand them without being entirely like them. I think that's why our clients, especially the male clients, feel so comfortable with you. They appreciate your concise analyses. You don't mind me being so open, do you?"

"Not at all," Kate replied, putting on a smile that concealed her true feelings. She still didn't know if JJ's words were really as flattering as they sounded at first. Was he trying to tell her that she was some kind of man-woman?

JJ picked up the water bottle on his desk and took a sip, never taking his eyes off Kate. "I'm going to make an important announcement at this ceremony Jansen has arranged for next Monday," he said. "No doubt the rumors have reached you by now."

Katenodded. The merger. The appointment of a vice president.

"I'm really glad," JJ said then, "that you've taken on the Farmer's Bounty matter. Jansen is a critical client, and Farmer's Bounty is a difficult project." He leaned forward and fixed Kate's gaze. "This company is in a prime position, Kate. Market research isn't just about films and margarine anymore. We're needed everywhere these days. There's only one thing that

could stand in the way of our expansion."

"Lack of quality", added Kate.

JJ smiled. Once again, his assumption was confirmed. Kate immediately grasped the point. "I can't deal with everything anymore," he said, "and I need a vice president who knows exactly what's going on. If you keep up your performance, you could be that guy."

Kate felt her heart race with excitement, a pleasant warmth spreading from her stomach throughout her body. Her sacrifices had not been in vain; the many overtime hours at the office and the follow-up and preparatory work at home had paid off.

Stop! a voice inside her said. It's not time yet. He was still just waving a carrot in front of her, trying to get more out of her. But by God, she would do even more, because there was nothing in the world she wanted more than this position. She was willing to do anything for it.

"How about we discuss everything else over dinner?" JJ asked.

Kate looked at him uncertainly for a moment. "Sure," saidthen she.

“Tomorrow evening at eight. In *Commune*. Suits youthe?"

"I'm sure I can arrange it," Kate replied.

JJ laughed relaxedly, as if to seal a silent agreement. Kate joined in, although something about JJ was uncomfortable. Perhaps the way he squinted his eyes briefly? Was he perhaps winking at her?

But Kate immediately shook off any emerging concerns and focused solely on the carrot. She thanked JJ for his trust and left his office.

Then Darci came toward her. She was excited. "Stuart's on the phone," she called from a distance. But Kate wasn't about to let Stuart spoil her euphoria, so she waved her hand. "He's in the hospital," Darci said, sounding extremely concerned.

Stuart lay there, dead tired. But he still couldn't sleep. Too many thoughts swirled around in his head. Besides, his situation was not conducive to a restful sleep.

He was in a splint up to his hip, his left arm hanging in a sling. The doctors had listed countless fractures and thrown around long Latin names that Stuart had immediately forgotten. He knew his condition anyway: He was a wreck.

A glimmer of hope flickered in his gloomy mood when Kate entered the room. He had briefly told her what had happened to him over the phone. After everything that had happened between them, he greatly appreciated her for not abandoning him. But she was far from understanding his real problem, a problem that made his broken bones seem like minor bruises.

While Kate Stuart straightened the pillow and his blanket

As Kate shook her head, she talked incessantly about some kind of bone specialist and lawyers who would sue the property management for tens of millions of dollars in damages. Stuart wasn't listening. When Kate finally caught her breath after a while, he simply said, seemingly incoherently: "Leopold is sitting in my apartment. God knows anything could happen to him. He was even outside today."

"Of course he was outside," Kate replied, pulling up a chair and sitting down. "I told him to walk the dog."

"But you can't do that!" Stuart exclaimed. "He's not allowed on the streets. He doesn't know our big city life. Besides, he has no money."

"Now stop it."

Kate didn't understand why Stuart was worried. Even if he came from the country or Europe, Leopold was a grown man who could take care of himself. Stuart, however, looked at her seriously, even trying to sit up a little, but failed miserably. "Nothing can happen to him," he implored Kate. "His mere presence here has created an occlusion."

Kate raised her eyebrows. "A what?"

Stuart hesitated, as a nurse came in to check on Stuart's roommate, who was slumbering in a drug-induced haze, fed by a series of tubes. A monitor blinked silently.

"I'm talking about a rift in the space-time continuum," Stuart said in a subdued voice. "Can you imagine what will happen if he's not back in his time by next Tuesday? I'll cease to exist!" Stuart noticed that Kate and the nurse, who was obviously listening with pricked ears, exchanged a strangely sympathetic glance. Nevertheless, he continued: "I'm his descendant, Kate. And there are plenty of others. If Leopold doesn't return, he won't be able to marry and have children. What happened to the elevators will happen to me!"

He was visibly distraught, which didn't make things any easier for Kate. The nurse's gaze became increasingly piercing. To her, Stuart was someone who had watched too many episodes of Star Trek. Kate thought the same.

"This is getting embarrassing." Kate stood up. "I have a lot on my plate right now and I have to go..."

Stuart grabbed her hand. "Take me home."

"Are you crazy?" Kate exclaimed. "Look at yourself.

"Someone has to look after Leopold."

"He can take care of himself very well."

"Wait!"

Stuart reached into a drawer of his nightstand, where his things had been placed, and pulled out a roll of film. "Have the film developed," he urged. "You can wait for the pictures; it'll only take an hour. Then you'll see."

Kate watched the film. What if the images confirmed Stuart's story? Nonsense, she thought. There's no such thing as time travel, and whatever those images might show, it wouldn't be from the last century. She didn't take the film, just looked at

Stuart's face and said, "I'm sorry you're so badly hurt."

Stuartcollapsed. "It happened," he said wearily.

"I've been there. Why do you think the elevators aren't working anymore?"

Kate bent down as if to a child. "I'm an adult, Stuart," she said, "and adults don't believe in such stories."

With that, she left him. Stuart remained, despairing. What should he do now? He had to get out of here, he had to get to Leopold before irreparable damage was done. His eyes met those of the nurse, who looked at him sternly, as if to say: You shouldn't even think about it!

6

A long, eventful day was drawing to a close. At least, that's what Kate thought as she entered her apartment, heavily laden with shopping bags. But when she saw her brother Charlie's duffel bag on the couch and heard singing and piano tinkling coming from Stuart's apartment, she sensed that this day, so full of surprising twists and turns, was far from over.

That's typical Charlie, thought Kate, as she put her shopping in the kitchen. Her little brother saw nothing wrong with coming and going as he pleased. He didn't even think it necessary to call ahead. He'd probably been kicked out of acting school in LA. Or more likely, he'd quit himself. Or maybe his girlfriend—what was her name again?—had just dumped him out. There were a thousand reasons why dear Charlie could have shown up at her house. Or really, just one: because he was a wimp who didn't have enough backbone to follow through. Kate regretted giving him a key to the apartment. But then again, she did that every time he showed up after one of his hopes hadn't come true. And yet she didn't take the key away from him. He was her little brother, after all, whom she'd been caring for since their parents died in an accident ten years ago.

A short time later, she climbed the fire escape to Stuart's apartment. The view through the open window was nothing short of idyllic. Charlie and little Hector stood next to the piano, singing songs from ancient musicals with Leopold, who played the accompaniment. Leopold was wearing some of Stuart's clothes, while his own were hanging on hangers. He had obviously washed them.

"Can"Can I speak to you for a moment, Charlie?" Kate interrupted.

The three of them noticed her only now. They greeted her with a friendliness that, in its innocent warmth, seemed disarming at first. Charlie tapped his two singing companions

on the shoulder and said goodbye, but not without inviting Leopold to dinner. Since Leopold was as hungry for a delicious meal as he was for a reunion with Kate, he thanked her for the invitation and agreed to come. Kate smiled painfully.

She and Charlie climbed down the fire escape together and a short time later found themselves face to face. Of course, Charlie felt the air burning, but he pretended not to notice and tried to cover up the tension with banter.

Kate simply cut him off. "Why are you back already?" she asked. "And why didn't you at least call first?"

"I thought -"

"You were thinking something?" Kate exclaimed. "That would be something new. No, you weren't thinking anything of it, Charlie, and that's exactly the problem. That's why you invited Stuart's crazy friend to dinner—to my apartment! He's probably just as much of a parasite as you are. He's even wearing Stuart's clothes."

This wasn't the first time Charlie had heard accusations like this. He had a thick skin. "Leo's kind of stranded," he defended Leopold. "Stu's in the hospital. Plus, he's helping me improve my British accent."

Kate rolled her eyes and turned away. But then she saw Leopold coming in through the open window. He had also taken the fire escape route. He was now wearing his velvet, gold-embroidered tailcoat again, making a perfect bow to Kate and holding out a flower.

"MineAdoration," he said.

Kate rolled her eyes again and disappeared into the kitchen, where pots and pans could soon be heard banging.

"She'll calm down," Charlie said lightly, winking at

Leopold. "You're going to see this through to the last consequence, aren't you? Are you one of those Lee Strasberg types? Method acting and all? Not acting the part, living it?"

Leopold, of course, had no idea what Charlie was talking about. Therefore, he preferred to remain silent. Charlie, however, admired him even more. He was convinced that Leopold had once been

Actor would make it big, given how seriously he took the role he was obviously preparing for.

Kate could hardly tear her eyes away from how perfectly Leopold handled his cutlery. Even Knigge could have learned a lot from that.
What was on his plate was not haute cuisine, but just a turkey burger garnished with a few lettuce leaves.

"When is Stuart coming home?" asked Charlie, because Kate had just told him about her hospital visit.

"Perhapsin a week," she replied.

Leopold looked up in surprise. "He promised me he'd be back tonight," he said.

"Stuart isn't exactly great at keeping promises," Kate retorted sharply.

When Leopold had finished his burger, he pushed his plate away and said, "We can now serve the second course."

Kate and Charlie looked at each other in astonishment before turning their eyes to Leopold. Charlie suppressed a grin. "There's no second course," Kate replied with an indignant tone.

Leopold took his napkin and dabbed the corners of his mouth. It wasn't his intention to undermine his hostess, but he couldn't resist remarking: "Where I come from, a dinner is the result of numerous considerations. The menu is carefully planned in advance, each course served at exactly the right moment. They say that without culinary refinement, the barbarism of life would be unbearable."

"That's what they say," Kate replied. For her part, she was more than satisfied with one course in this company. So she stood up. But she hadn't even pushed her chair away when Leopold jumped up as well.

"What is it?" she askedand looked at him expectantly.

"What do you mean?"

"Why are you standing up?"

Her question surprised him. "It is not fitting for a gentleman to remain seated when a lady rises," he explained.

Charlie also stood up. Kate looked at the two of them.

Was that

A game? Were they trying to make fun of her? She certainly had no time for that kind of joke, especially not when it was at her expense. She decided to simply ignore it, picked up her glass, and disappeared into the kitchen. There, she poured herself more wine, filling it to the brim. Maybe I can join in the laughter when I'm drunk, she thought.

She heard the two of them sit down again and Leopold report that he had looked through Stuart's scientific papers that morning and found them extremely interesting. "Have you ever read them?" he asked. Charlie shook his head.

"But I did," said Kate, returning with the full glass. Leopold immediately rose. "I wanted to show that I was interested in his work," she continued, taking a seat. Leopold followed.

"Is Stuart still working on the time machine?" asked Charlie. "That's the special thing about it, Charles," said Leopold,
"That, as Stuart discovered, no machine was needed. Rather, it was necessary to develop formulas that would allow a prediction of when a portal would open, a natural window within the fabric of time. Stuart evidently found one by resorting to modern methods of weather forecasting."

Kate couldn't stand it any longer. How could the two of them talk about such a fantasy as if it were reality?
"What nonsense!" she exclaimed, stacking the plates and standing up. Leopold also jumped up. Kate disappeared into the kitchen.

"What is a time portal?" she heard her brother ask. "An opening that exists only for a short period of time," Leopold explained, completely serious, which made Kate even more furious.
"You have to jump through it from a great height because it requires a certain speed to pass through it.

The speed of gravity, to be precise."

Charlie had watched Leopold closely, looking for even the slightest wink, any uncertainty, any break that would reveal the true man behind the role, the actor. But there was nothing. His admiration

grew immeasurably. This man would make all Robert De Niros and Dustin Hoffmans pale in comparison.

Suddenly, Kate stormed out of the kitchen. She'd had enough of this talk once and for all. "Get out of here!" she screamed. "Both of you! I've had enough of your nonsense!" Her eyes sparkled.

Leopold rose and made a gallant bow. "I'm very sorry if my behavior has offended you in any way." Then he turned and climbed out the window. Kate and Charlie listened to the creaking of the fire escape.

“What was that just now?” Charlie asked angrily.

"The guy thinks he's a count from the nineteenth century," Kate replied. That said it all for her. What further explanation was needed?

"AndIsn't he good?" Charlie replied.

"No!"

"He's an actor! He's acting!"

"Oh," Kate replied snippily. "And where is he employed?"

Charlie recoiled as if something had physically hit him. Kate's lack of understanding hurt him. What kind of world was this that measured the value of artistic endeavor only by the amount of the fee? "Just because you don't have a commitment," he said sharply, "That doesn't mean that you don't work on yourself."

With that, she turned on her heel and slammed the doors. My doors, Kate thought angrily.

Although the nurse had turned out the light some time ago, Stuart was still awake. The night nurse's footsteps occasionally drifted in from the corridor, and the wailing of ambulance sirens from arriving and departing sounded repeatedly from outside. Stuart was in no mood to sleep. His powerlessness tormented him. As he lay here, strapped to a stretcher, the extinction of his existence drew inexorably closer. He had only one hope. Perhaps giving Leopold

instructions would be enough. He had to jump on his own anyway. And once he had studied the documents, perhaps a few explanatory words would suffice, so that he

knew what he had to do, when and where.

Stuart nervously looked at the telephone on his bedside table. It kept flickering in the pulsing light of the indicator light on his roommate's monitor. He waited for the night nurse to check the phone, pretended to be asleep when she glanced in from the doorway, and then painfully tried to reach for the receiver. He succeeded. And he managed to dial the number. The greater his disappointment, the deeper his despair, when all he heard was a busy signal. He tried to put the receiver back in its cradle, but it slipped from his grasp and became tangled in his roommate's wires.

Exasperated, Stuart sank back onto his pillow. The next moment, he realized that Leopold probably hadn't hung up the phone properly after this morning's conversation. How would he know how to do that? There was only one thing left to do: Stuart had to call Kate.

His gaze fell on the receiver caught in the wires. "Hey, buddy," Stuart called to the slumbering man next to him. But he didn't hear. So Stuart tried to free the receiver himself, hanging halfway out of bed and then carefully pulling on the cable. But the receiver was hopelessly caught in the wires. Desperately, Stuart pulled a little harder – and was startled to the core. The steady, low hum of the device died away. Apparently, he had pulled a plug somewhere. After a few seconds, a terrible whistling sound began.

Before Stuart could return to his bed, the night nurse, a corpulent Jamaican woman, stormed in and turned on the light. Stuart looked at her guiltily. Her already unfriendly expression darkened further. She fixed the peacefully sleeping patient's machine and turned to Stuart. "What does this mean?" she barked. "Do you want to kill the man?"

"I wanted to make a phone call," Stuart replied.

"You see, I have to get out of here!"

She braced her massive arms against her equally massive sides. "How many times do I have to tell you? You're not going anywhere until Dr. Fienstein approves your release."

"Have you ever heard of the space-time continuum?" Stuart asked. The nurse shook her head and turned her broad back to him. "The space-time continuum is damaged, and I'm the only one who can repair it. So you should call Dr. Fienstein now and ask him if he cares about the future of civilization. If so, he needs to call me immediately—"

Stuart's speech stopped just as the nurse turned back to him, approaching threateningly with a syringe. Before he could resist, she had already placed it in his forearm. He felt only a brief prick, then a tug—and the next moment, he lost consciousness.

7

Kate was in the middle of her morning Tai Chi exercises when a loud wailing sound reached her from Stuart's apartment. It was undoubtedly the fire alarm. What on earth had this Leopold done now? Was he planning to burn the house down? Kate first left the lying dog position and then, via the fire escape, into her apartment. By the time she reached Stuart's window, she was already hit by the smell of burning. It was coming from the kitchen. There she found Leopold, completely exasperated, standing next to the toaster, with charred slices of toast piled up around it. "That thing is dangerous!" he exclaimed.

"It's a toaster, nothing more," Kate replied, picking up a baking tray and waving it in front of the smoke detector until it went silent. Then she threw open the kitchen window to let the smoke escape.

"Then why can't you make decent toast with it?" Leopold asked. "One use only produces warm bread, and two uses produce coal. There's no intermediate stage. One would have expected that General Electric would test its toaster before pushing it on people."

Kate was taken aback at first. General Electric? Then she saw the manufacturer's logo on the appliance: General Electric. How funny, she thought, not amused. "This General Electric doesn't give a damn about having to put the toast in the toaster twice," she said. "And you know why? Because everyone here does it!"

Leopold raised his eyebrows. "Not where I come from."

"Sure. Where you come from, toast is the result of many considerations," Kate mimicked him, something that Leopold didn't miss.

"You shouldn't make fun of me," he replied with

dignity. "One day, when you are looking for a pleasant slumber

When you wake up to the smell of a warm brioche spread with jam and creamy butter, you may understand that in life it is not about practicality, but about taste."

Kate stood there, thunderstruck. Speechless. Leopold was perfect. Exactly what she needed for Farmer's Bounty. The tone of voice. The facial expressions. That slightly elitist demeanor that, nevertheless, didn't seem blasé, but rather exuded sophistication. And to top it all off, he looked no less delicious than the brioche he described.

"I'll be right back," Kate said and left the kitchen.

Leopold stood there in amazement, only hearing the squeaking of the

Fire escape. A little later, Kate returned with a piece of paper. "Read this," she said, holding it out to him. Undecided, Leopold took it and read: "Fresh butter. Is there anything tastier? There certainly is. And you'll agree once you try Farmer's Bounty. Every bite tastes the best butter. With Farmer's Bounty—"

With every word Leopold read, the satisfied smile on Kate's face had widened. She'd heard enough. Leopold was the right one, the needle in the haystack. And she'd found it. She snatched the paper from him and said excitedly, "Get dressed." With that, she disappeared again.

A short time later, Kate and Leopold were sitting in a taxi. Leopold wore his gold-embroidered coat and velvet waistcoat. He watched in amazement as Kate talked on her cell phone. How could a telephone work without wires? It bordered on magic. And this means of transportation, which Kate had called a car, also fascinated him.

"Driver," he asked the sweaty little man at the wheel, "becomesthisVehicle powered by combustion?"

“Huh?” the driver just said.

Leopold then opened the car door to study the movement of the wheels. He had already noticed that they appeared to be made of rubber or a similar material. Perhaps

That's why they're so quiet. No comparison to the rumbling horse-drawn carriages.

"Hey, man, are you crazy?" the driver yelled at him. But only when Kate urgently told him to close the car door did Leopold comply.

The taxi stopped in front of a high-rise building where MRG was headquartered. While Kate counted a few dollar bills into the driver's hand, Leopold insisted on knowing why the car was so quiet. "It has a muffler or something," Kate replied, getting out. She walked purposefully toward the entrance.

Leopold, however, who was not able to let go of this problem, remained standing.

"How does this muffler work?" he asked the taxi driver, who casually let his elbow hang out the rolled-down side window. The taxi driver shrugged and then said, "It's like they fart with a sock up their ass."

Leopold raised his eyebrows. A very vivid comparison, he thought. He thanked her and followed Kate, who was waiting for him at the front door.

On the way to her office, Leopold made sure to hold every door open not only for Kate, but also for other ladies who passed by and were deeply impressed by such gallantry.

Arriving in the MRG office corridors, they were met by Darci, whom Kate had spotted through the glass door. Kate briefly introduced her to Leopold, but without stopping, as she was expected at the audition. Darci was very taken with Leopold. It wasn't just his outfit that made him seem like one of those romantic heroes in the historical novels she loved to read. He also exuded an aristocratic aura. Keeping an eye on him, she briefly brought Kate up to speed: JJ wasn't there yet, the audition had just begun, and she hadn't missed anything. "Put Leopold last on the audition list," Kate instructed. Darci nodded.

Leopold was amazed the whole time at the pace

Kate was setting. In his time, no woman of standing or honor would have

paced, not even when she was in a hurry, for being late was the prerogative of ladies.

Finally, Kate turned to Leopold. "Darci will take you to the waiting room, Leopold," she said. "It will take a little while." She started to leave, but then turned back. "If you need to talk to someone," she added,
"Go ahead and tell your count story. But leave out anything that has to do with portals, rifts, and that space-time thing."

Before Leopold could say anything, she was already gone. Darci pressed his script into his hand and led him into the waiting room. Numerous actors were sitting on chairs or pacing restlessly, reciting their lines to each other silently or muttering. No one seemed to notice Leopold. He watched everything that was happening around him with even greater fascination.

"This is an absolute disaster."

Phil said what everyone in the control room was thinking. The atmosphere was oppressive, like before a thunderstorm. Kate, too, was caught up in the nervous restlessness. Another so-called trained actor had just recited the Farmer's Bounty lines, but it was already clear that the focus group wouldn't like it. The mostly female viewers, sitting on the other side of a glass wall, pressed a few buttons on the underside of their monitors, and a short time later Kate's suspicions were confirmed. She glanced furtively over her shoulder, because JJ was sitting in the back of the room. He was on the phone, but to think he was inattentive would have been a grave mistake.

"We're through with applicants," said colleague Bob dryly, looking at his clipboard. "Luckily, Kate found another candidate. Mr. Leopold Duke from Albany. No references, no union, not even an agent."

He raised his eyebrows, as if he expected even less from this applicant than from all the others.

Kate's tension grew. On the drive here, she had been so sure, but now she too was overcome by doubt. What,

What if Leopold finally got nervous and failed? Many a talented performer had gotten weak at the knees and messed up in the studio. Kate felt JJ's piercing gaze on the back of her neck. Her hands grew sweaty.

An assistant brought Leopold into the studio and placed him at the marker. He couldn't see Kate and her team behind the glass. Leopold was driving the sound engineer nearly crazy by constantly fiddling with the microphone.

Phil sighed. He hated working with amateurs and semi-professionals. And this was even a complete novice. Besides, that outfit. What did you expect from someone like that? "We can do without him," he said to Kate.

"We've wasted enough time. We finally have to make a decision."

"Look at him, Phil," Kate begged him.

"I think he looks like that guy from the cereal commercial," Phil replied irritably.

“This is not about what you think, but what they think," Kate replied, pointing to the focus group.

The women among them began to whisper to each other. Kate knew this kind of whispering; it was a very specific kind of female whispering, and so she knew what the women were talking about, even if she didn't understand a single word. They said: Isn't he cute?

"A man like him is a dream," Kate continued. "He's handsome, sincere, polite. He stands up when a woman enters the room, reads poetry, brings breakfast in bed. 'If you eat our margarine, your hips will slim down and maybe one day a guy like that will show up at your door.' That's the message, Phil."

Phil took a deep breath and dropped the pen he'd been impatiently toying with the whole time. "All right," he said, "if it makes you happy."

Meanwhile, Leopold was being briefed by an assistant director wearing a headset. "That's the

teleprompter, Mr. Duke," he said, pointing to the box in front of Leopold. "Your lines will appear there." Leopold nodded. He still didn't have a good idea

He had no idea what was actually going on. He was just playing along to do Kate a favor. He was also interested in all the technical devices. "What's that?" he asked.

The assistant director looked behind him. Not sure if Leopold was teasing him, he said, "That's the camera."

Phil and the others in the control room laughed, although, at least as far as Phil was concerned, it was a rather bitter laugh that could turn into a fit of rage in a split second. Kate nervously bit her nails. JJ looked bored, and that was anything but a good sign.

"Quiet, please!" came the assistant director's voice from the studio. "And... action!"

Leopold stared perplexedly into the camera. Phil clutched the edge of the table. Kate broke out in a sweat and sent prayers to heaven. Leopold was about to embarrass her to the core. Goodbye, Vice President Kate McKay.

"Come on, boy," the cameraman whispered to Leopold. And only then did he realize it was time to get started. Smiling into the camera, he began: "Fresh, creamy butter. Is there anything more comforting? There is. And I'm sure you'll agree once you try the reduced-fat Farmer's Bounty. Every bite is savory with buttery flavor."

Leopold was so caught up in the excitement of Farmer's Bounty that he forgot the marker on the floor and took a step toward the camera. His face now filled all the monitors in the control room as he continued: "With Farmer's Bounty, you get all the buttery taste without the regrets for your slim figure. Try Farmer's Bounty today and lose weight, not the joy of life."

Kate got goosebumps. Leopold had already finished his text when she was still staring transfixed at the screen, at his face. Then she exchanged a glance with

Phil. He looked at her with a satisfied grin. They both knew they had found the perfect man for the commercial. Everyone in the room knew it. The focus group was also united in their enthusiasm. Kate breathed a sigh of relief. Victory all around.

JJ saw it no differently. He stood up and approached her with a satisfied smile. "Congratulations," he said.

"Kate is the best," said Phil. And he meant it.

"I know that," replied JJ

Kate blushed in embarrassment. She got up and left the room with

JJ entered the control room. Leopold and Darci were already waiting in the hallway. Leopold didn't give the slightest impression of being aware of his accomplishment and what he'd done for Kate. Darci, on the other hand, seemed to be bursting with joy. JJ gave Leopold only a passing glance, gave Kate a shoulder squeeze—the hint of a hug—and left, but not without reminding her of their evening appointment. How could Kate have forgotten!

Darci also said goodbye. "It was nice to meet you," she said to Leopold. He bowed and kissed her hand. "The pleasure was all mine," he said. And it didn't seem affected or forced in the least. Intoxicated and exhilarated by such gallantry, Darci turned and left them, Kate noticing a particular swing in her hips that she had never seen before. She looked at Leopold searchingly, narrowing her eyes slightly. Either he was really into it, or he was the most devious man she had ever met.

But at the moment it didn't matter at all, at the moment she finally had to express her joy, and so she did, as soon as she was no longer aware of curious glances, by performing a dance of joy that would have done credit to a football player after scoring the game-winning goal.

"You look content," Leopold said with a smile after she had calmed down a bit.

"Satisfied?" she replied. Did he really not understand what he had just done? "This commercial will be a blast. You'll be a star!"

Leopold had no idea what she was talking about.

As they left the agency and went downstairs, something else was on his mind. The looks JJ had given Kate hadn't escaped him, and the implied hug was his.

In his opinion, this was far beyond what a man could do to a woman in public. But it wasn't just her honor he was concerned about. For a reason he wasn't entirely aware of, he didn't want Kate to meet this man.

"You're going out with this man tonight?" he asked, outwardly calm but inwardly tense. They were crossing the entrance hall toward the exit.

"You mean JJ?" Kate replied cluelessly. "Yes. He's my boss."

"You shouldn't go alone, Kate. This man's intentions are too obvious."

Kate sighed. What could that possibly mean? "I'm alone with you," she said. "And there's no chaperone anywhere."

Leopold smiled and held the door open for her. “I’m also"Not the court," he said as she walked outside. Kate was still too agitated inside to detect the regretful undertone. "If that were the case, as a man of honor, I would naturally have sent you my intentions in a note."

Kate raised her eyebrows. When would he finally stop playing this role? Someone like Darci might be impressed by this posh, old-fashioned demeanor, but it was clear to her that men generally just put on a show to hide their true selves. Leopold was no exception.

Kate stepped to the side of the road and looked for a taxi. Getting a taxi was already a problem in New York, but here in Central Park with all the tourists, it was almost a lottery. Leopold stayed a few steps behind her, wondering why she didn't take one of the horse-drawn carriages parked a little further down the street, waiting for customers.

"Why don't we take one of these?" he asked, after several taxis had simply whizzed past them, and pointed to the carriages.

Kate didn't answer, just looked at him as if she doubted his sanity. Or was he just teasing her? Leopold's distraction had almost caused her to miss the taxi, which squealed to a stop in front of her. But another woman—a petite figure who almost disappeared behind her shopping bags.
– had also spotted the taxi and darted toward it as if on a spur of the moment. A heated argument immediately ensued.

Leopold stood a little way off and watched in amazement. Even in his day, there had been occasional arguments over cabs, but he couldn't remember two ladies of standing ever stooping to that. But then his attention was caught by a man who approached them with apparently less than honorable intentions. It was less his appearance that made him suspicious than the cautious glances he cast around him. Undoubtedly a representative of the thieving profession.

"Kate, watch out!" Leopold shouted, running, but he wasn't fast enough to stop the theft. As nimble as only a pickpocket could be, he grabbed Kate's purse. By the time Kate responded to Leopold's shouts, it was already too late.

But she wasn't the kind of woman who would tolerate such a thing. She didn't just curse him, but immediately gave chase. The thief ran into the park, knocking over startled tourists, knocking over rollerbladers, jumping over picnic baskets and sunbathers. Kate bravely held her own, but gradually her strength waned. The distance between her and the robber grew ever greater until the man finally disappeared among the trees.

Kate had already given up on her purse when she heard the clatter of hooves behind her. Panting, she stopped and turned around. She could hardly believe what she saw. A man on a white horse was galloping

across the lawn, straight toward her.

Leopold!

“Take my hand!” he called, extending his right hand to her from a distance.

What was he up to? Kate barely had time to think. Whatever it was, Leopold seemed so confident that she

She held out her hand to him in spontaneous trust. Just before he reached her, he slowed down, took hers in one hand, grasped her armpit with the other, and pulled her onto the horse. Kate let out a scream. Before she knew it, she was sitting on the white horse in front of him. Leopold gave the horse a good thump of his heels, causing it to immediately pick up speed again.

"What the hell is this?" Kate snapped at Leopold, clinging to him at the same time.

"Duck"You yourself," he simply replied.

She ducked her head, not a second too soon, for they were already diving beneath the trees, where the pickpocket had disappeared. Branches brushed past their heads as the horse snorted as it climbed a hill. A moment later, the thief appeared in front of them. He had slowed down, obviously believing himself safe. When he looked back, he froze for a moment before breaking into a run. In vain, it seemed at first, for his pursuers were rapidly approaching. He realized he stood no chance and would have to change his strategy.

A path frequently used by park visitors approached the grove. The thief leaped from the undergrowth into a crowd of people scattering in alarm. Leopold immediately realized he intended to use the people as a shield. But he had miscalculated. Kate screamed, the white horse leaped, and landed on the paved path. Sparks flew beneath his shod hooves as he chased after the thief.

But then the next obstacle appeared: a row of park benches. The robber pushed his way between them, beyond which stretched a small patch of grass. Kate's eyes widened. Her heart stopped when she saw Leopold's expression. It reflected fierce determination. "You can't be serious!" she exclaimed. "No! Stop the horse immediately! For heaven's sake!"

Too late. The animal's front hooves were already lifting, and the next moment its hind legs were too. They leaped in a high arc over the bench to land softly on the other side. Kate had the

Her eyes closed, she clung even tighter to Leopold. When she opened them again and realized they had landed softly, a contented, even enthusiastic laugh escaped her. A laugh of the kind she had often laughed as a girl, a laugh that didn't care how others received it, or whether it was too loud or not ladylike enough. A laugh that was completely her. It felt good to feel that girl from back then inside her again, if only for a brief moment, because the chase continued unabated and left her no time to dwell on it any longer.

The thief had taken a narrow, secluded path that wound between hills. Only much too late did he realize he was trapped. The path ended beneath a bridge at an impassable barrier. The hills rose steeply on both sides, bare rock jutting out from them. By the time the man turned around, it was already too late to look for a way out. Leopold dashed forward at full speed and brought the white horse to a halt right in front of him. Snorting, the animal pranced in front of the thief, whose eyes betrayed panic.

Leopold unbuckled his belt, pulled it out, and brandished it threateningly at the man by the buckle. "I warn you, scoundrel," he hissed at him, trembling with rage. "I learned to ride at the Royal Academy and was trained in hand-to-hand combat with the Palace Guard. You don't stand a chance. No matter where you run, I'll be behind you. And once I get close enough, this belt buckle will punch a hole through your skull. Therefore, I strongly advise you to drop this lady's possessions and return to the shadows from which you crawled!"

The thief stood there, his knees shaking. He didn't seem to have understood every single word Leopold said, but he'd understood enough to expect a beating if he didn't hand over his loot. After briefly assessing the situation, he dropped his handbag and ran away.

A crowd had gathered on the footbridge and was now loudly applauding.

Leopold bowed briefly to his audience, then helped Kate off her horse and dismounted last. He picked up the handbag and handed it to Kate, whose hands were shaking.

"Thank you," she said simply, still spellbound. What had just happened seemed so unreal to her. Or could there be anything more unreal than a horse chase in Central Park? But the man in front of her, who acted as if this were the most natural thing in the world, also seemed unreal. For a second, she even considered the possibility that Stuart was right and Leopold came from a past century. Nonsense, she thought immediately. Nevertheless: Leopold was something very special. Her heart beat wildly: with excitement, but also with emotion.

"Let's go back," Leopold said. "The coachman, who was kind enough to lend me his horse, is waiting."

He swung himself back onto the animal's back and held out his hand to Kate. She hesitated at first, but then took it and let him pull her up. They trotted at a leisurely pace toward the park exit, not saying much to each other. Each lost in his own thoughts.

The coachman was indeed expecting his horse. But Leopold insisted on harnessing the gray horse himself. He did it expertly, as if he'd never done anything else in his life. Meanwhile, Kate took a seat in the carriage and smoked a cigarette. The coachman joined her. "Your friend is a damn good rider," he said.

Kate nodded.

"Would you like to go for a little carriage ride?"She nodded again.

A short time later, Leopold had harnessed the horse and joined her in the carriage. The driver sat on the box and cracked his whip. The carriage rumbled into motion and disappeared into Central Park.

Kate still didn't know what to say. Until now, it had

been clear to her that Leopold was feigning something to them all. But had the wild chase through the park also been feigned? She watched him as he let his gaze glide over the park landscape. Something about him moved her deep inside.

Hearts. His eyes were completely clear and sincere, and his otherness became more and more apparent to her. The way he looked at everything. So full of respect. Astonished. Not at all "cool." It seemed as if he had retained something deeply childlike.

Then their eyes met. She smiled. And he returned theA smile, even if there was a hint of melancholy in it. "When this park was created in my time," he said, "there was a tremendous outcry. Why leave such a vast area undeveloped in the middle of the island? people asked. No one saw the point, because there was still plenty of nature all around. Only now do I understand the foresight of my contemporaries."

Kate turned her gaze away from him and let him look over the

The park landscape. Sunbathers enjoyed the late afternoon sun on the lawns, others played Frisbee; elderly ladies walked poodles; rollerbladers swept down the paths; children licked ice cream. She had seen it all countless times, passing by carelessly. Never before had she noticed how beautiful it all was. And never before had she felt gratitude for the people who had created this park not for themselves, but primarily for future generations.

Finally, she turned her eyes back to Leopold. "Are you real?" she asked gently.

Heraised his left eyebrow in surprise. "Excuse me?"

"Are you real, Leopold?"

"I think so," he said.

"So you really are a count?"Leopold

smiled gently.

"I was born a count. But I never felt like one."

Kate nodded. Then she looked back out at the parkland. She was convinced that Leopold believed what he was saying. At the moment, she felt strangely indifferent. Aren't we all playing a role? she wondered. That's not the important thing. The

question is whether we play our roles well. And Leopold played it brilliantly.

At first, Stuart resisted seeing a psychiatrist. After all, he wasn't crazy. But then he realized that the doctors interpreted his refusal as further evidence of his delusional state. So he finally relented and allowed himself to be taken to the hospital's own psychiatrist.

Dr. Bernstein sat behind his desk, observing his patient with a gaze that didn't reveal what he was thinking. Perhaps that was due to his rather greasy glasses. Stuart sat in an uncomfortable plastic chair in front of him, his leg in a cast resting on a second chair. From time to time, the psychiatrist's hand reached into a box of peanuts, which he then crushed with relish between his teeth. He had all the time in the world, while for Stuart, nothing was more urgent than getting out of there. And he had made that clear to Dr. Bernstein several times.

"I don't understand why you want to keep me here," he said, again on the verge of despair, "when you yourself confirm to me that I don't have to stay because of my injuries."

"There is strong suspicion that you are a danger to yourself, Mr. Besser," Dr. Bernstein replied matter-of-factly.

"InIn such cases, the law requires–"

"I'm supposed to be a danger to myself?" Stuart interrupted indignantly. Was he being incapacitated? He grabbed his crutches and awkwardly rose. "I'm sorry," he said firmly, "but I'm afraid I have to leave you." He hobbled to the door, only to find, to his further indignation, that it was locked. After rattling it with increasing force for a while, he spun around and faced Dr. Bernstein. "Why is this door locked?" Hateful glances met the impassively seated psychiatrist.

"Why did you jump into the elevator shaft?" he asked, shoving another handful of peanuts into his mouth.

Stuart let out a disgruntled noise. "I didn't jump," he said. "I fell. There's a significant difference."

"And"Why did you fall?" replied Dr. Bernstein.

"Because there was no elevator!" Stuart yelled at him. His face turned bright red with anger, the veins in his temples swelled dangerously.

Not that this impressed Dr. Bernstein in the least. Emotion was part of the process, and the more intense, the better.

"And"You blame yourself for this," he said coldly.

Stuart hobbled over a little and said, less loudly, "Indirectly. Look, if you take your great-great-grandfather out of his time, before he invented the elevator and fathered your great-grandfather, it's only logical that nature will correct the resulting error. That is, it will make all elevators and you disappear."

During Stuart's speech, Dr. Bernstein had been running his tongue along his teeth to remove peanut residue, while his hand was already digging back into the box. "But you exist," he said casually.

"Maybe I've just been lucky so far," Stuart replied, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

"Morphic resonance is an extremely complicated and difficult-to-predict process." Stuart saw in the psychiatrist's face that every word was wasted. And of course, he also sensed how crazy his story must sound to someone who knew absolutely nothing about the subject. "You must be an extremely busy man," he said. "There must be a lot of people who desperately need your help. Fortunately, I'm not one of them. So I'm asking you: Open this door!"

Dr. Bernstein didn't move an inch. He looked like a ruminating cow. His composure almost infuriated Stuart. He hobbled back to the door and pounded on it with his fist. "Open up!" he yelled. "Can't anyone hear me? I'm being held here against my will!"

It didn't take long until the door actually opened. But Stuart's burgeoning hope was quickly dashed. The blonde receptionist stood in the doorway, behind

her a tall man whose eyebrows were so thick and

were so bushy that you could have mistaken them for his hairline.

"Everything"Okay?" trilled the receptionist.

"Everything's fine, Gretchen," replied Dr. Bernstein.

The door closed again. And with Gretchen and the closet, Stuart's last hope of ever getting out of there again left.

Meanwhile, Dr. Bernstein took out his prescription pad. "I'm prescribing you a remedy for your anxiety," he said, scribbling on the pad. "Don't worry, it's only a very mild remedy. It will help tide you over until our next session."

"If I'm still here then..." Stuart replied resignedly.

8

Ever since she had returned from Central Park with Leopold, Kate had been feeling a strange restlessness. Her pulse was faster than usual, and a queasy feeling was noticeable in her stomach. She suspected that the upcoming dinner with
JJ was responsible for it, because after all, a lot depended on it. But deep down she knew that wasn't the real reason. While she was getting dressed, she couldn't stop thinking about her experiences in the park: the wild chase as well as the romantic carriage ride. As a young girl, she had firmly believed that one day a fairy-tale prince would come riding in on a white horse to make her his princess. And if she was honest, she had only recently put that dream to rest when she realized that she had an inexplicable weakness for court jesters even more than for princes. Men like Stuart, in fact. And Leopold was probably one of them, even if he really had come riding in on a white horse and defended her chivalrously. Or maybe precisely because of that.

In her elegant pantsuit, she stepped out of the bedroom and into the dressing room mirror. Her brother, Charlie, sat in the living room watching a baseball game, while Leopold tried to teach Bart some basic canine etiquette. "Sit, faithful friend," she heard him say, "sit! Now come. Heel." While Kate was doing her hair, her eyes kept wandering to him, but whenever he caught her eye, she immediately looked away. Stop it, Kate, she thought, blushing. Focus!

Leopold looked at Kate with obvious pleasure. He was impressed by the way women dressed in this century.
In his time, women rarely wore trousers, only those women's rights activists, who men either laughed at

or scolded. Since then, a lot had obviously changed, both in terms of the position of women and the fashion cut of

As far as women's trousers were concerned, Kate, despite her trousers, exuded ladylike elegance.

Since this afternoon, Leopold found the fact that Kate was spending the evening with a man whose intentions undoubtedly went far beyond business even more disturbing than before. He liked Kate. Perhaps even more than that. She was so completely different from the women of his century, who frittered away their time reading fashion magazines or romantic pulp novels, exchanging gossip, and planning evening parties.

Kate noticed him staring at her, and she liked it. She suspected whatwas going on inside him. Since her return from the park, he had repeatedly asked her about her date with JJ and expressed his concerns. His concern touched her, so much so that part of her wanted to stay and spend the evening with him. But the other part told her that JJ wouldn't like a cancellation.

Before leaving the apartment, she entered the living room and asked Charlie, who was sitting in front of the TV with a can of beer, what he and Leopold were planning for the evening. Charlie shrugged.

"Maybe we'll go for a drink after the game," he replied.

Kate turned to the door. Leopold was already standing there, holding out her coat. "I'd like to reiterate my offer to act as your escort," he said as she slipped into the coat.

"That's nice of you," Kate replied, flattered, "but it's not necessary."

Leopold turned to Charlie for support. "As her brother, don't you think it's inappropriate to let your sister go like this?" he called into the living room. He couldn't understand how Charlie could just stand by and watch Kate's reputation being tarnished.

"As her brother, I find it inappropriate that my

sister didn't get me an audition for this spot," came the offended reply from the couch.

"You're not exactly the ideal spokesperson for margarine advertising, Charlie," Kate replied matter-of-factly.

Charlie looked over the arm of the couch at his sister. The fact that she had immediately brought Leopold to the studio without even considering him hurt him deeply, even more so when she constantly rubbed his lack of success in his face.
"I can do anything you want," he said. "After all, I'm an actor. If you want, I can even speak with a British accent." He gave a brief demonstration of his skills, but it didn't convince either Kate or Leopold.

The doorbell rang. "That must be the taxi," said Kate. She said goodbye, again touched by Leopold's concerned expression, and left the apartment.

Leopold joined Charlie on the couch, but he wasn't interested in the game. He was lost in his thoughts, most of which concerned Kate, and wasn't even bothered by Charlie's cheers for the Mets. After a while, Bart came over and laid his head on Leopold's knee.

After the game ended with the Mets winning, Charlie got ready. Then he left the apartment with Leopold. "We're both going to have a drink," he said promisingly. Leopold, however, had only a vague idea of what he might mean by that.

New York City vibrated with life. Leopold couldn't stop marveling. The streets were full of people and cars, neon signs flashed and glittered, snatches of music reached his ears, and a variety of smells—cheap perfume, garbage, hot dogs—filled his nose. Finally, Charlie stopped in front of a bar window and looked inside. He felt a certain longing, Leopold thought. "Is anyone there you know?" he asked.

Charlie nodded. "The brunette with the long hair," he said.
"Her name is Patrice."

Leopold scanned the crowd inside the bar and found Patrice. As far as he could see, she was indeed

very pretty, with her large dark eyes, high forehead, and full red lips that looked as if painted by an artist. "She's a beauty," Leopold said.

"AndShe's mine," Charlie replied.

"Congratulations."

A warm feeling spread from Charlie's stomach to every corner of his body. He wished things between him and Patrice were even half as certain as he made them out to be.

The two entered the bar. Charlie strode purposefully toward a table where several young women were sitting in animated conversation; Leopold stayed a step behind him. He marveled at the daring women's fashion of this century and hardly knew where to look. Wherever he looked, he was met with bare women's legs and low-cut, tight-fitting tops, all too invitingly displaying what they were supposed to shield from prying eyes.

Charlie introduced Leopold to the young women: Dennis, Allison, and Monica. Leopold gave each a slight bow. Just then, Patrice approached with several cocktails she'd brought for herself and the other girls. Charlie struck a pose meant to appear particularly casual and, alluding to the many drinks in Patrice's hand, said, "And this is the insatiable Patrice, Leo." He plopped down into an empty chair.

“Man, the cocktails lookbut looks great."

Patrice greeted Leopold briefly but politely, then smiled even wider at Charlie. Leopold, however, couldn't bear to watch Patrice balancing the many glasses. "Let me help," he said, taking a few drinks from her and placing them on the table.

Then he pulled out her chair. She looked at him with a mixture of astonishment and pleasure and sat down. The other women also briefly interrupted their conversations to observe this outrageous incident.

Charlie noticed the looks Leopold was receiving. He vaguely sensed that it was actually his job to treat Patrice with gallantry and courtesy. When Patrice took a cigarette immediately afterwards, he pulled out

his new lighter and let a huge flame shine in front of her face, almost singeing her hair. "You look good, Patrice," he tried next to

to cover the courteous part now also the gallant part, "Really mouth-watering."

Patrice forced a smile, Leopold raised an eyebrow. Then he took a seat and gave way to Charlie. Charlie immediately commanded everyone's attention, telling them with great fanfare about an acting workshop he had recently attended and about exciting artistic experiences – he used the word
"exciting" in every other sentence - and came by convoluted paths to the view that the treasures of life are hidden like in a cellar.

"Similar to the Louvre," Leopold interjected. Everyone turned to him. Questioning looks. Apparently, some of the girls didn't even know what the Louvre was. "The museum in Paris," he explained, embarrassed by such ignorance.
"Forgive me," he said, turning to Charlie, "I didn't mean to interrupt you."

Charlie, meanwhile, was completely thrown off track. He sensed he was fighting a losing battle, because while he was rambling, a casual remark from Leopold had been enough to leave the girls, and especially Patrice, in almost awe.

“What about the Louvre, Leo?” Patrice wanted to know.

"Nothing at all," replied Leopold, who was embarrassed by the situation,
"Charles'History was much more interesting."

Charlie narrowed his eyes. Was this Leopold's trick: first pique interest with a casual remark and then beg for a plea? Whatever, he had to remember it, because it worked brilliantly. Everyone just wanted to hear the Louvre story, while Charlie and his intense artistic experiences were completely tuned out. Especially with Patrice, and that hurt the most.

When Leopold noticed that the girls were only satisfied
would if he told them about the Louvre, he gave

Charlie a regretful look and then said, "Most people don't know this, but only a small part of the Louvre's art treasures hang on the walls. The vast majority are in the cellars."

To Charlie's distinct displeasure, the girls' eyes grew wider and wider. Dennis even leaned toward him and quietly asked him if Leopold was gay, but then didn't wait for an answer and said to himself, "He's definitely gay. The really great men are always gay."

"Have you ever been to the cellars of the Louvre?" asked Patrice.

"Of course," Leopold replied, then lit Monica's cigarette as if it were the most natural thing in the world, took one for himself from Charlie's pack, and even offered one to Charlie, who didn't react but just stared at him with his mouth open.

"I majored in art," said Patrice.

“So what’s in the basement of the Louvre?” Monica finally wanted to know.

Leopold gracefully disposed of the ash on his cigarette and said, "That's where the truly interesting exhibition begins. Works that no dilettante student or restorer has ever touched. Works by da Vinci. David. Designs by Rodin. Outstanding works of art of humanity lean against the walls there, surrounded by natural sponges that absorb the moisture."

Awe-struck astonishment on all faces. This was the The moment Charlie began to hate Leopold. And when he realized he had to bring about a change, he didn't want to completely surrender the field—and Patrice's heart—to Leopold. "How about we dance a round?" he suggested.

The suggestion was met with unanimous approval. A short time later, Leopold stood at the edge of the dance floor, marveling at the astonishing transformation that the understanding of music and dance had undergone in the last hundred years. The bass boomed deafeningly, colorful lights flashed, the dancing couples contorted their bodies without touching. Leopold watched as Charlie danced with

Patrice. Or rather, he hopped around in front of her. She, meanwhile, kept glancing furtively at Leopold.

The other girls had also found dance partners. Nevertheless, after a while, Monica and Dennis came up with Leopold

and tried to persuade him to join in. Since they didn't let up, he finally stepped onto the dance floor and tried a few tentative steps. At first he seemed rather stiff. But then he found his way into the fast rhythm, learned a few moves and developed a dance style all his own, a kind of techno waltz, with which he not only attracted the attention of the people dancing next to him, but also that of Patrice. As if drawn by a strange force, she moved further and further away from Charlie and closer to Leopold. Charlie's expression darkened. When he saw Patrice dancing in front of Leopold and even trying to imitate his idiosyncratic dance style, he knew the evening was over for him.

Leopold and Charlie walked silently down the street, Leopold half a step behind Charlie. Although it was almost midnight, the streets were bustling with activity, and the bars were still packed.

"I was so close," Charlie finally broke the silence. He was annoyed. More than annoyed. He was angry. "She would have definitely given me her phone number tonight. But then you come along with your act."

"I beg your pardon," Leopold said meekly.

But Charlie paid no attention. Once he got going, he wasn't so easy to stop. "This constant shuffling of chairs. Are you sitting comfortably? After you, please... And then, to top it all off, you had to start speaking French – that was absolutely amazing."

Leopold just sighed. What could he have done? The girls had begged him so insistently that he knew they wouldn't rest until he fulfilled their request.

Charlie stopped dead. "Let's face it," he said bitterly. "Patrice thinks you're cute. Maybe gay. But cute, anyway. Cute is as good as dead. For me, of course." He strode on with long strides. Leopold

struggled to keep up. He pulled a napkin from his jacket pocket.
"I assume this is her number," he said.

Charlie stopped as if struck by lightning and turned around. His hand grabbed the napkin. Stunned, he read: Patrice
*555 7856.*She had given him her number on the very first evening. And worst of all, Leopold probably hadn't even asked her for it.

"The way I see it," Leopold said matter-of-factly, "Patrice hasn't the slightest idea how you feel about her. That's no wonder, though, when you're always acting like a fool, Charles."

Charliewas almost speechless. "The what?"

"You act like a joker, and of course, you're seen as one. But women expect seriousness in emotional matters. Stop playing this game. What woman wants to be courted by a clown?"

Charlie sensed Leopold was right, and that was perhaps the worst part. He had been wrong from the start. Patrice thought he was a clown, and quite rightly so.

"CallPatrice tomorrow," Leopold advised.

"But she gave the number to you," Charlie objected dejectedly.

Leopold smiled. "But only because I told Patrice about your feelings."

Charlie swallowed. Should he be happy about this friendly favor? Or wouldn't it make him look even more ridiculous to Patrice than he already did? "What did you tell her?" he wanted to know.

"Simply that you admire her, but have not wanted to court her openly because you have heard that someone else is courting her."

"Holy shit," Charlie exclaimed, "that's good. What did she say?" "She gave me the napkin."

What now arose in Charlie was more than just a spark of hope—it was a veritable firework of hope. All resentment toward Leopold was forgotten; he would have loved to throw his arms around him. However,

he refrained from doing so and instead ran toward a nearby public telephone.

"It's getting late, Charles," Leopold pointed out as Charlie dialed the number.

"I know," he replied. "Patrice probably isn't home yet. So her answering machine will pick up. I'll leave my number. Then it's up to her to pass the ball back to me."

Leopold shook his head. "You may not want to be a clown anymore, but don't be a strategist either. The key is to play the ball and thus keep control."

Charlie rubbed his chin as the receiver beeped. Before the answering machine picked up, he hung up. "You're right," he said. His admiration for Leopold grew. He knew how to seduce a woman.

"There's no need to do anything else tonight," Leopold assured her with a confidence that left no room for doubt. "Tomorrow you'll make your first move, but that, too, is only a prelude. You're revealing your intentions. But remember to please Patrice, not upset her."

Charlie sighed. Doubts overcame him as to whether he would ever be able to do it. Leopold patted him encouragingly on the shoulder.
"You'll see more clearly tomorrow. We should go home now. Kate is probably home by now."

"I don't think so," Charlie contradicted.

Leopold didn't like hearing that. He was reminded of JJ's intimacies in the studio. A deep frown formed between Leopold's brows. "It's almost midnight," he said.

Charlie looked up. Suddenly, he began to understand. Amusement spread across his face. "You have a crush on my sister, don't you?" he said.

Leopold didn't reply, but simply walked away. His heart was pounding, and he felt his cheeks heat up. On the one hand, the idea of Kate spending more than just the evening with that disgusting JJ enraged him; on the other, he didn't like being seen through by Charlie.

He quickly caught up with him and grabbed his

arm. "Why didn't I notice that before?" he exclaimed. "You have a crush on my sister." Charlie raised his eyebrows mockingly and imitated Leopold's British accent as he said, "You have your

Surely your intentions have been revealed, haven't they? You have?"

Leopold's gaze fell first to the ground and then to Charlie. He seemed annoyed. Charlie laughed. Apparently, it was one thing to give good advice and quite another to follow it himself.

"You know what," Charlie said. "The Commune is just around the corner. Maybe we should stop by. You can show me some of your tricks while you're at it. That chair-pulling thing. A few gallant gestures here and there." He laughed out loud and poked Leopold in the side in a friendly manner. "It was easy with Patrice, huh? If you don't care about it. But when it comes down to it, if you like the girl, then you're just as scared as I am."

Leopold didn't answer, but kept walking. It looked like an escape attempt, Charlie thought. "Who's the idiot now?" he called after him.

Leopold stopped and turned around. “Where is this *Commune?"*, wanted heknowledge.

Commune had only recently opened, but it had quickly established a reputation as one of the finest French restaurants in all of Manhattan. It's no wonder, then, that the crème de la crème of New York society—or what passed for crème—flocked there. The waiters all spoke with French accents, even though most of them were from New Jersey or Connecticut.

JJ and Kate had finished a multi-course meal, and a waiter was clearing the plates when JJ once again—for the umpteenth time, actually?—praised Kate's skill in the Farmer's Bounty business. "Where did you find that guy?" JJ was asking. He meant Leopold. "You saved Phil from his own indecision."

"I just knew he was the one," Kate said, raising her glass. "From my gut." She put it to her lips and took a sip of wine. Oh my God, she thought. I'm flirting

Uninhibited with JJ How far am I willing to go for this position? She felt the alcohol rising to her head.

"I'm counting on that belly," JJ replied, smiling. "Your boyfriend will be a star, I promise. Do you actually sleep with him?"

Kate choked and almost spat out the wine.
"Naturallynot!" she replied indignantly.

JJ seemed satisfied and ordered the dessert menu. As he scanned it, he began to talk about his country house, where she absolutely had to visit him. When Kate seemed undecided, he asked about a weekend at the opera. "La Bohème is being performed at the Met." Kate stammered a little, crumpling her napkin. "I've never seen you so nervous, Kate," JJ said, amused, "and I haven't even tried to kiss you yet."

Kate felt herself blush. How could she get out of this unscathed without offending JJ? Or was he in the middle of dictating the terms of her advancement within the company? "This whole thing is really worrying me a little, JJ," she said carefully. "I'm really torn. Yes, torn is a good word." She cleared her throat. "I mean... I like you. But a working relationship like ours demands... demands..." She didn't know how to finish the sentence. A bad feeling crept over her that the evening was about to turn sour.
"Maybe we should clarify what kind of employment relationship we actually have."

JJ didn't get a chance to answer because suddenly a shout rang out across the restaurant. "Hey, Kate!" Kate turned her head. To her astonishment, she saw Charlie approaching. Leopold followed at a short distance. "What are you doing here?" she asked her brother as he stood grinning next to her.

"Oh," he replied, "we were just passing by and thought we'd say hello." He turned to JJ and extended his hand. "You must be Kate's big boss. I'm Kate's

brother, Charlie. The actor." He emphasized it in a way that replaced an entire application letter. Then he pointed behind him, where Leopold was waiting some distance away. Leopold was embarrassed.

touched, because to burst into a dinner like that went against everything he had been taught about tact and politeness.

“This is Leopold,” Charlie introduced his friend.

JJ just nodded, giving Leopold a quick glance. Of course, he recognized him immediately. How could he not remember the man who had saved the Farmer's Bounty campaign? Leopold stepped closer and gave JJ a slight bow, which was meant to express politeness rather than appreciation. Then he turned to Kate.

"Can I speak to you privately for a moment?" he said with a serious, yesworried expression.

"What?" Kate asked. She could already guess what he wanted. But she wasn't a little girl anymore. Even if she had planned to sleep with JJ, that would have been her decision alone.

"Please join us, Leopold," JJ Leopold patronizingly invited. "I was just telling Kate about the eighteenth-century country house I bought in Sussex."

Leopold looked at JJ with a disdainful look. But thereThe offer was more than convenient, so he took a seat. Charlie followed. Kate narrowed her eyes in annoyance. She sensed the worst and already swore revenge if the two of them embarrassed her in front of JJ.

"With all due respect," Leopold said to JJ as soon as he sat down, "where did you say your country house is?"

"In Sussex," JJ replied, leaning back casually. But his nonchalance was feigned. After the test recording, he had already instinctively identified Leopold as a rival. Nervously, Kate lit a cigarette.

"Approximatelynear Ballmour?" Leopold asked.

JJ nodded.

"You're absolutely sure?"

"Naturally."

"InThere is nothing but farmland around Ballmour."

"Shemust be wrong."
"Absolutely not."

Everyone at the table sensed the tension building between JJ and Leopold. Only on the surface was the issue of the existence or non-existence of a country house somewhere in the middle of nowhere; in truth, it was a duel of words that could hardly have been fought more sharply and relentlessly with sabers. Kate knew she had to do something. JJ was unpredictable when someone exposed him and hurt his vanity.

"Sheare definitely mistaken, Leopold," she said.

"I'm not doing that at all," he insisted, folding his arms across his chest. He felt a sharp kick to his shin, undoubtedly from Kate, for Charlie was watching the scene with gleeful delight. Leopold, however, was undeterred. He had decided to put this pompous fop in his place. "Ballmour is the only country house in the entire county," he said. "It's actually the only building there. I know that so well because I grew up there."

“Leopoldis a count",Charlie interjected.

JJ put on the most condescending grin he was capable of.

"A count applying to appear in a margarine commercial," he said, looking at his perfectly manicured fingernails.

"I do"It's only for Kate's sake," Leopold replied.

"Understand."

And of course JJ understood. He had understood from the very first second. The way Leopold had looked at Kate after the audition hadn't escaped him. And his seemingly random appearance here—what more could be said?

"JJ loves the opera, by the way," Kate chimed in, trying to distract from the country house question. She hoped this would be less of a minefield, but Leopold's raised eyebrows boded ill here as well. Nervously, she lit a cigarette and only then realized

she still had a not-even-half-smoked one in the ashtray. Charlie stubbed it out with a smile.

“Do you also have a favorite opera?” Leopold asked meanwhile.

"La Bohème",JJ replied, "I learned French with this opera."

"SheDo you speak French, JJ? " Kate asked in surprise.

JJ saw the admiration in her eyes and allowed himself to exaggerate slightly, saying that he not only spoke it, but spoke it fluently. Leopold realized that JJ, in his excessive vanity, might have given him an open flank.

"Te bisoux m'arrive sur la jou comme le vent d'une window," he said with perfect pronunciation. All eyes turned to Leopold, but no one looked at him as stunned as JJ, who of course understood that he was about to be executed by Leopold.

"What did he say?" Kate asked JJ. She had never thought she would see the ever-confident JJ blush. But now, surprisingly quickly, he turned the color of a tomato.

Leopold, however, was too much of a man of honor to expose JJ to ridicule entirely. He had proven, with a clarity that left nothing to be desired, what everyone at the table except JJ already knew: that JJ was a pompous braggart. So he provided the translation himself, helping JJ out of his predicament: "Your kisses touch my cheek like the breeze from an open window."

"TheI like it," said Kate.

"It comes from the opening scene of La Boheme," Leopold explained. “A wonderfulAria."

"Andre sings it for Mimi," added JJ, who had quickly gotten over the shock.

Leopold flinched. JJ couldn't help trying to shine where he had none.

He was already showing off again. "I asked Kate to accompany me to the Met next week," he continued. "But she declined. Can you explain that, Leopold?"

Kate knew where this was going. Her heart was pounding wildly, her insides seemed to be twisting.

She lit another cigarette, but no one noticed, as everyone's attention was focused on Leopold. Showdown, Charlie thought.

"La Bohème is certainly a masterpiece not to be missed," he said, outwardly calm but inwardly tense to the breaking point. He had decided to treat JJ the way he deserved. "Perhaps Kate turned you down due to moral concerns."

JJ hid behind a mask of calm and arrogance. But inside, too, there was intense turmoil.

"Andthey would be?" he wanted to know.

"We should let the bill come," Kate interjected, a last helpless attempt to avert the inevitable.

No one paid any attention to her. Not even Leopold, who said in well-chosen words and a sharp tone: "Some may think that your courting of this lady's favor is nothing more than a snide attempt to turn a lady into a whore."

JJ sat there frozen. Speechless. Kate almost choked on the wine she had reached for in her embarrassment. Charlie blinked in disbelief. Had Leopold really said that? Had he

Did JJ really call a snake?

"I like this guy," JJ said, his throat hoarse, clearly trying to keep his composure. "So the Margarine Count thinks I'm a snake."

"But no. He was just joking." Kate forced a laugh. But no one laughed with her. Especially since Leopold immediately added another. "Not for a snake," he said.

"No. That would be too much of an honor. You're a braggart and a scoundrel. And one who speaks even less French than I do, which is hardly possible." Leopold stood up. He didn't want to sit at a table with such a person. He had already turned to leave, but then turned around and said, "By the way: There isn't a single Andre in all of Bohemia. The main character is called Rudolfo. And it's hardly played in French either, because it was written in Italian."

Kate sat there as if carved in stone, which perfectly

complemented her marble-white complexion. JJ, meanwhile, blushed bright red for the second time that evening. Leopold spun around and strode toward the exit. For a few seconds, there was complete silence.

at the table. Then Charlie suddenly started laughing loudly, jumpedand hurried after Leopold.

Leopold paced restlessly back and forth in the living room. Behind the sofa, where Charlie was passing the time with a video game, virtual machine gun fire alternated with virtual bomb explosions. On the way home, Charlie had patted his friend on the shoulder and congratulated him on giving what he called a "pompous buffoon" a piece of his mind. But Leopold knew he'd made an unforgivable mistake. He didn't regret telling JJ off, but he regretted embarrassing Kate and perhaps even damaging her career.

After a seemingly endless wait, the apartment door finally opened. Kate. Charlie also paused his game and looked over the back of the couch.

Leopold approached Kate. Her face was still ashen, but this was only a faint reflection of the devastation that reigned within her. She felt completely empty. "Allow me a word," Leopold began, visibly affected. Kate just held out her hand defensively. She couldn't speak now, especially not to Leopold. Tears welled up in her eyes. She turned away and entered her bedroom. Leopold followed her, but the door closed in his face. He was about to knock, but then decided against it.

After wishing Charlie goodnight, he disappeared up the fire escape into Stuart's apartment. He had to tell Kate how sorry he was for his behavior. Since she didn't want to talk to him, his only option was to write to her. He gathered some paper and a pen and sat down. Then he began to write. But he didn't like his first attempt. He tried again, then again, then again. The pile of paper balls at his feet grew larger and larger.

Leopold looked at the ballpoint pen. Certainly an

excellent invention. But in his eyes, completely unsuitable for capturing something from the heart on paper. He stood up and looked around the room searchingly. His gaze fell on a vase in which

in which a few dried reed stalks were stuck. He took one out and trimmed it so it could serve as a quill. In a drawer, he also found an inkwell. This time, better equipped, he tried again to put his feelings into words.

9

When Kate woke up the next morning, she briefly indulged the illusion that the previous evening had been nothing more than a terrible nightmare that had never actually happened. But this all-too-comfortable self-deception didn't last long, and she realized that Leopold had indeed insulted her boss terribly. After Leopold and Charlie had left, she had apologized profusely to JJ, but he had remained silent, a kind of silence she had never seen in him before, indeed, of which she hadn't thought JJ capable at all. A silence she had only known from people who doubted themselves. And this silence had continued on the taxi ride back. Only when Kate was about to get out had JJ said, "You're lucky to have such an admirer. He's educated, has style, and, when necessary, a sharp tongue. And last but not least, he possesses a certain kind of decency. A terribly old-fashioned word, don't you think?"

Kate had smiled, even though she hadn't felt like it, and got out. Only after the taxi with JJ had already driven away did she realize he hadn't been talking about himself, but about Leopold.

Kate sat up in bed and rubbed the last traces of sleep from her eyes. Leopold's intentions may have been honorable. Nevertheless, with all his decency and integrity, he had smashed valuable china, repairing which seemed an impossible task to her.

As Kate left her bedroom, ready for the day, the smell of fresh coffee filled her nostrils. To her astonishment, she saw from afar that the breakfast table was elaborately set. Clearly Charlie's work. "Coffee?" he asked. Kate shook her head and picked up her bag and coat. "I got you a newspaper," he said, knowing she always wanted to arrive at the office

well-informed. "Would you like to read it?"

Kate shook her head again. "I want to go to the office and try to repair some of the damage you caused yesterday." With that, she left the apartment.

Damn, she thought when she saw the sign outside the elevator door. The elevator was still out of service. Her legs felt as if they were rubbery. She descended the stairs. Then she heard Charlie behind her. Kate stopped. A moment later, her brother was standing in front of her. "If you don't want breakfast, you should at least pick up a kiwi for the road," he said, flashing that smile that would have forgiven him anything.

Kate let him slip the fruit into her pocket and simply said, "That's not a kiwi, it's a papaya."

"I thought she was a bit big for a kiwi."

Kate forced a smile. Then she continued walking. Charlie watched her until she disappeared at the bottom of the stairs.

This morning's meeting was delicate in many ways. Not only for Kate, who had not yet had the chance to JJ. It was about toilet paper. Their colleague Bob, whom they secretly called Mr. Etched, was raving about a new brand that, while a large percentage of test users had described as pleasantly soft, an even larger percentage found too soft and therefore ineffective. Bob cleared his throat every other word while presenting these results.

Kate kept looking at JJ, but his attention was otherwise occupied. He seemed to be taken with the leggy blonde intern. Apparently, last night hadn't damaged his male self-confidence. Disgusted, she averted her eyes. To avoid sitting there like a complete idiot, Kate randomly pulled a folder out of her bag. When she opened it, she was astonished to find a letter. "Kate," was written on it in flowing handwriting. It was undoubtedly from Leopold, because who else would seal a letter with wax?

As Kate carefully broke the seal, she wondered how

the letter could have gotten into her pocket. Charlie came to mind.

again. Of course! He must have put the letter in her pocket along with the papaya.

Kate unfolded the paper and read: "Dearest Katherine, I behaved like a fool last night; partly because of my childish pride, and partly—and this above all—because of your beauty. Please be assured of my deepest regret, and as a token of your forgiveness, please grant me the favor of a shared dinner on the roof of your house. Would eight o'clock be convenient? With deepest affection, your Leopold."

Kate was moved by the sincerity of these simple yet beautiful lines. Each word was carefully chosen and set in a flowing, elegant script. She read the letter again and again, touched each time. Could she stay angry with Leopold any longer? Especially since everything he'd said about JJ was true. JJ was a pompous, slick guy.

JJ's voice tore Kate from her thoughts. "How about *Farmer's Bounty,*Kate?" she ambushed her. "Would you like to fill us in?"

Kate looked up in shock and was suddenly confronted with the expectant expressions of her colleagues. She avoided JJ's eyes and rummaged through her papers. Darci had given her the results of Leopold's test shots before the conference began. They were impressive. "We got 96 percent approval," said Kate. "The women, who are the main target audience for the commercial, found him 'handsome' and 'romantic,' a few even hand-scribbled 'What a man!'"

Restrained laughter spread, only JJ remained serious.

"Excellent," he said curtly, closed his notebook, and stood up. The meeting was over.

Kate pocketed the folder containing Leopold's letter and hurried after JJ, who hurried out of the room. To avoid a conversation with her? Kate called

after him, and he stopped and turned to her. "I wanted to apologize again for yesterday," she said. "It could have been such a lovely evening."

"I appreciate it, Kate," he replied coolly.

"Then everything's okay?"

JJ looked at her. He knew, of course, what she meant: the position he'd promised her. "Everything's fine," he said, even smiling, albeit forcedly. Then he disappeared into his office, the intern following only seconds later. As she passed, she shot Kate a dirty look. Apparently, she suspected her of being a competitor. JJ's reassurance hadn't completely assuaged Kate's concerns. How much would his promises be worth tomorrow?

Leopold had no doubt that Kate would accept his apology and the invitation. So he left Stuart's apartment early to run errands for dinner. Before doing so, however, he rang Charlie's doorbell and asked him to tell him the best shops for the items on his shopping list. Charlie gladly obliged. He, in turn, had errands of his own; above all, he wanted to impress Patrice with a bouquet of flowers. He hoped for Leopold's advice on the selection, which the latter gladly agreed to, especially since he also had floristry on his list. It was also a perfect fit that Leopold had used the previous sleepless night to compose a few lines for his friend Charlie, which would be helpful in his courting Patrice's favor. The two agreed to meet later at a florist's. Then they each went their separate ways.

Leopold first visited a gourmet market that Charlie described as exquisite. He critically examined the various cheeses, meats, and poultry on display. The goods made a good impression. The same could not be said of the burly salesman behind the counter, however. He barked at his customers in an unfriendly manner, and they reluctantly accepted his treatment, but without a audible grumble.

"Did I read that right?" Leopold asked when it was his turn. "Does a pigeon really cost seven dollars and

ninety-five cents?"

"The pound," grumbled the salesman, wiping his hands on his apron.

"It still seems very expensive to me."

"Then just don't buy anything. Next!"

Leopold thought for a moment. The goods looked good, and he had no idea where else to shop. So he decided to swallow his anger at the salesman's behavior. He reached into his vest pocket, pulled out a few English gold coins, and placed them on the counter as a sign that he was finally willing to buy. The old lady next to Leopold looked at the coins in astonishment, as did the burly salesman. "American money only," he barked.

"Well, perhaps you'll grant me credit," Leopold replied coolly.

The salesman narrowed his eyes. Was this snob with his British accent trying to pull his leg? Then he'd picked the wrong guy.

“Fuck off!” he snapped at him.

"Pardon?" Leopold replied, shocked by such a level of vulgarity, which was further heightened by the fact that a number of older ladies were listening.

"YouYou understood me quite well," the man growled.

"May I remind you that I, like everyone else in this store, am a customer, and you owe me respect. Without us, you would be nothing. A beggar."

"Give it to him!" came the muffled cry of an old lady from behind. Other customers nodded in agreement.

The salesman seethed with rage. He circled the counter and stood in front of Leopold. This made him appear even larger than he was behind the counter, a veritable mountain of flesh.

"Get out of here, you little brat!" he shouted at Leopold and grabbed him by the collar.

Leopold was prepared for this, and his training with the Royal Guard had not been in vain. With a nimble movement, he wriggled out of the grip, grabbed the man's arm, and twisted it behind his back. It all seemed so easy that the ladies couldn't

stop marveling. They spontaneously applauded. The mountain of flesh tried to free itself, but failed. When Leopold finally let go, it stumbled a few more times.

He took a few more steps before he recovered. Meanwhile, Leopold left the store with his head held high. And with him, the old ladies.

One of them introduced herself as Ethel. "The service used to be good in this store," she explained, "but since the owner changed, the manners have also suddenly deteriorated."

"We should have bought somewhere else long ago," said another of the ladies, "but an old person is a creature of habit. There's a butcher down the street, and he's not bad either."

Ethel leaned toward Leopold and lowered her voice as she said, "My husband is a jeweler, so I know enough about old coins to know that what you have in your pocket is worth a lot of money. In a town like this, you shouldn't just be walking around with it. You'd better take it to a bank."

Leopold thanked him for the advice, asked for directions to the nearest bank, and said goodbye. A few minutes later, he stood before the neoclassical facade of the Bowery Savings Bank. Although he had never been there before, he recognized it immediately. It was depicted on the ballpoint pen that Stuart had lost in 1876 and with which it all began.

Fifteen minutes later, Leopold left the bank. Instead of his gold coins, he now had several thick bundles of banknotes in his pockets. He hurriedly finished his remaining purchases and then met Charlie at the agreed-upon flower shop. Charlie was already waiting for him impatiently. "Have you picked anything out yet?" Leopold asked, gazing over the floral splendor of roses, tulips, chrysanthemums, and daffodils.

"I thought I'd send her this little bouquet," Charlie replied uncertainly, pointing to one of the ready-made bouquets at a special price.

Leo looked at the bouquet and shook his head.

"That won't work, Charles," he said. "Look. The begonia and the lavender represent danger and suspicion. Every flower has a meaning, Charles. May I make you a suggestion? Why not use amaryllis, which compliments the

represents the recipient's extraordinary beauty. Or the centifolia, the messenger of love."

Charlie swallowed. He felt admiration for his stylishFriend, but also a dose of skepticism as to whether Patrice would understand the subtle language of flowers. "She will," Leopold countered his objection, "if not with her mind, then with her heart."

Some time later, the two left the store, laden with bouquets and arrangements, not to mention all the other bags containing Leopold's purchases. He had paid for everything with a wad of hundred-dollar bills. Charlie hailed a taxi, and a short time later, they were on their way home.

As the two entered the lobby, laden with bags and flowers, doorman Gracy emerged from behind his counter and held out the key to the roof to Leopold. Leopold put down one of his bags and pocketed the key. "A violinist will be here at seven," he announced. "Please send him to the roof." Leopold had heard him playing on a street corner and immediately hired him. He handed Gracy a hundred dollars for his efforts and walked on, ignoring the doorman's thanks for the generous tip.

"The things you wrote down for me," Charlie said a little later in the stairwell, "I mean, what I'm supposed to say to Patrice. I can't do that. That's not me, you understand? Patrice will laugh at me."

"It's all just a matter of practice, Charles," Leopold replied. "Besides, you're an actor, right?"

Together they went up to Stuart's apartment. Leopold immediately glanced at the phone. He now knew how the answering machine worked and hoped to find a message from Kate. But the red light wasn't flashing. Instead, a fax had arrived. "It is with great pleasure that I accept your invitation. Kate," it read. His heart leapt. He just wondered how the messenger had gotten into the apartment to deliver the letter.

In high spirits, Leopold helped Charlie put the groceries in the refrigerator and put the flowers in water. Then he sent Charlie into the living room because he wanted to start

to prepare dinner for Kate. "Besides, you have something to do," he explained. "Patrice must have received your flowers."

Reluctantly, Charlie trudged into the living room. An audition for a lead role in a Steven Spielberg film couldn't have made him more nervous than what lay ahead. Finally, he forced himself to dial Patrice's number. He spread out the cheat sheet with Leopold's little phrasing tips in front of him.

"Hello?" Patrice answered. She sounded expectant. Because she suspected he was on the phone? His heart was pounding in his throat with excitement.

"Hi, Patrice," he said. "It's Charlie. I just wanted to ask if you got my flowers... I mean, your flowers... well, the flowers I sent you." Charlie was sweating profusely. This was just about the hardest thing he'd ever done. Too hard, he feared, his gaze wandering between Leopold's notes without finding a fix. "I was wondering if you'd like to go to the movies with me tonight. And afterward... maybe we could go out to dinner afterward. I mean, I'd really appreciate it. A ton."

There was a moment of silence on the line. Charlie feared that at any moment her laughter would break over him like a tornado. But the storm didn't come.
"Are"Is that really you, Charlie?" she asked.

Charlie looked up. He noticed Leopold standing in the kitchen doorway, watching him. That didn't exactly make things easier. "I don't want to pressure you," he said, picking up a cue from the cheat sheet, "I would certainly understand if you had already made other arrangements for tonight... I also just wanted to say..."

Charlie flinched. Now came the hardest part. With a look, he begged Leopold to forgive him the rest. But Leopold remained adamant, took a step closer, and looked at Charlie sternly.

"What?" Patrice's velvety voice came over the line. "What did you want to say?"

Charlie swallowed dryly, sweat beading on his forehead. "I just wanted to say that you made quite an impression on

made me. Not just your looks, although you certainly look great... really great... it's also..."

"What?"

"You're so..." - he closed his eyes, as if swallowing a particularly fat toad - "...so graceful. The way you move, the way you speak. I mean, someone else could probably express it much better than I can. What I really want to say is... that I like you very much."

A long, deep silence followed. Not even Patrice's breathing could be heard. Charlie wondered if she hadn't fainted long ago.

“How about seven o’clock?” came from the receiver.

Charlie could only hear a ringing in his ears. The blood pulsed wildly through his veins. Had she really said that? Or was he just imagining it? But she had said it. Seven o'clock, she had said. The words seemed sweeter to him than honey, more lovely than the scent of roses.

"Seven o'clock is perfect!" he exclaimed. "Seven o'clock is my favorite time. I'll be with you at seven o'clock! Take care. See you then!"

He hung up and looked at Leopold. Now that all the burden had been lifted from him, he felt as light as a feather. "It worked," he said, stunned. "It worked!"

Leopold just smiled. Of course it had worked. Why not? A lot may have changed in the last 120 years, but one thing certainly hadn't, and it would still be the same in a thousand years: The royal road to a woman's heart was paved with compliments.

10

Stuart felt like he was trapped in a nightmare. He had been transferred to the psychiatric ward of the hospital and given many colorful pills to swallow, which he always just put under his tongue and immediately spat out after the door closed behind the nurse. The stuff was probably sleeping pills and tranquilizers. When the ward finally fell silent in the evening, Stuart sat up and pulled his crutches over. He desperately needed a telephone. And he knew where to find one.

He hobbled quietly to the door, opened it a crack, and peered into the hallway. No one was there. The nurses' station was also deserted. Stuart carefully pushed himself out and silently closed the door behind him. Time was running out, as the night nurse could return at any moment. His heart pounded like a jungle drum as he hobbled the few meters down to the nurses' station.

Once there, he picked up the phone and dialed Kate's number
and sank to the floor so he couldn't be seen from outside. Kate was his only hope if he didn't manage to escape. Stuart breathed a sigh of relief when he heard Kate's voice, but his heart sank immediately when he realized it was just the message on her answering machine.

"Answer the phone, Kate," he implored her in a subdued voice. "I probably won't be able to try again later, so please answer!" He waited for agonizing seconds, but nothing happened. "All right," he said. "I've been transferred to another ward, Kate. The point is, they don't want to let me go, even though I'm feeling better. You absolutely have to come and get me out of here, Kate. Today is Friday. It's not long

until Monday. Leopold absolutely has to come back on Monday. So you'd better keep an eye on him."

Stuart wanted to put the receiver down, but then noticed

He was horrified to find that he wasn't alone. Behind him stood the night nurse. She had her arms akimbo and was looking down at him reproachfully, as if he were a naughty boy.

Get me out of here, Kate! Stuart thought desperately. Where are you?

Kate stood in front of the mirror in the low-cut black strapless dress and looked at herself. She thought she looked absolutely stunning. Loud music drifted in from the living room. At one point she thought she heard the phone ringing, but she hadn't paid it much attention because the answering machine was on. Besides, she found it difficult to tear herself away from the sight of herself. Leopold will be impressed, she thought, but immediately wondered why she cared so much about impressing a man crazy enough to think he came from the nineteenth century. Nobody is perfect, she thought then, and at least he has manners.

With butterflies in her stomach, Kate left the apartment and climbed the stairs to the roof, which was like an obstacle course in her high heels. Her effort was more than rewarded. As soon as Kate pushed open the heavy iron door, the sweet scent of flowers hit her. She stood there, speechless with amazement. The roof had transformed into a sea of flowers. A lavishly laid table was set between fireplaces and water tanks, candles were burning, and the city lights sparkled in the background. A little way off the table stood a violinist playing a piece by Vivaldi.

At first, Leopold was so dazzled by the sight of Kate that he almost forgot to greet her. Then he stepped up to her all the more quickly, took her hand, bowed, and blew a kiss on the back of her hand. Kate was overwhelmed. "That's... wonderful," she said, almost

speechless.

"That's exactly what I wanted to hear," Leopold replied contentedly. "May I ask?"

He offered her his arm, she took it, and he led her to her seat. Then he sat opposite her. There was roast pigeon, prepared according to a new French recipe, as he

said. "An old French recipe, you mean," Kate joked, smiling.

Leopold looked at her for a moment, then understood. "Certainly," he said, pouring her wine.

The food tasted delicious. Everything else was delicious too. Kate absorbed the wonderful ambiance with every pore of her skin. No man had ever done anything like this for her. "Forgive me for my bad behavior?" Leopold asked after a while.

"Actually, I shouldn't," Kate replied, "because then you might do something so wonderful for me again."

Leopold understood and breathed a sigh of relief. So, in this respect, too, the effort had been worthwhile.

When Kate finished eating, she leaned back. She felt the wine slowly going to her head. After all, she was already on her third glass. She picked up her cloth napkin. Of course, she immediately recognized that it was her own. She had inherited it from her mother. Just like the dishes. Presumably, Charlie had given them to Leopold.

"My mother loved French fabrics," said Kate. "She was such a romantic. When Prince Charles and Lady Di got married, she threw a party. There were tons of pancakes with jam and it was like a Super Bowl party for mothers. Luckily, she didn't have to witness their marriage end. It would have broken her heart."

"Unfortunately, I don't know the story of Prince Charles and Lady Di," Leopold replied.

"It's better that way. It's a story that makes one cautious; that could serve as evidence." Leopold heard sadness in her words.

"AsProof of what?" he asked.

"That happy endings only exist in fairy tales."

Kate looked at Leopold. He probably thinks I'm a bitter woman now, too, she thought; a bitter woman who sometimes seeks solace in alcohol. She emptied

her glass and refilled it.

Leopold watched her with a smile. Maybe he likes bitter women, Kate thought, returning the smile.

"I have no luck with men," she said resignedly.

"Maybe you just haven't found the right one yet," Leopold pointed out.

Kate breathed heavily. How many times had she heard that? From her mother. From Darci. "Perhaps what is said and believed about love is like the fairy tale of Santa Claus, only for adults," she said. "A myth that has been instilled in us since childhood, so that we buy these magazines with real and made-up love stories, join all kinds of clubs, go to therapy, and watch movies with long montages of romantic pop songs. But isn't all of this a pathetic attempt to explain to us why our love Santa Claus keeps getting stuck in the chimney? I didn't make it this year, but next year I'll be a lot better, and then maybe…

Leopold laughed. Not at Kate, because he sensed how deeply felt every word was. It just amused him in a sad way that he had had exactly the same thoughts. His laughter died down.

"My servant Otis always told me," he then began, "that love was a leap. Unfortunately, I never felt sufficient incentive for that leap. On my thirtieth birthday, my uncle let me know that in his eyes, I brought shame on the family. It was my uncle who brought me to America, but only on the condition that I marry an American woman.
A girl with a lot of –"

"Charm?" Kate suggested, although she suspected what he was about to say. Leopold smiled.

"Money," he corrected soberly. "Since the
Since my parents' death, the family fortune has... well, shrunk a little." A smile came to his lips again, but it was not without bitterness. He thought of his uncle's long lectures, which ultimately always amounted to the same thing: We need money, but we must not

work for it under any circumstances. How often had Leopold told him

He had been accused of this way of thinking being outdated. In the era into which he had suddenly and through no fault of his own, it would even be considered offensive, he quickly realized.

"If I hadn't followed Stuart," he added after a few seconds of silence, "I would be married now. I was to announce the name of my chosen one that evening."

"Oh," said Kate in surprise. "And who was she?"

Leopold shrugged. "I don't know. Any." Leopold looked at Kate. Something unspoken hung between them. And she guessed what it was: If you had been among them, the choice wouldn't have been difficult for me. Kate was shocked. Mostly at herself. Was she really buying his—and Stuart's—fanciful story of time travel and temporary portals? Or was she starting to fall in love with some crazy guy who thought he was a count from the nineteenth century?

Lost between happiness and despair, Kate fled from his beautiful dark eyes and let her gaze wander over the sparkling city lights that shone before her like a second firmament. But she couldn't regain her composure. So she finally rose to clear the table.

Leopold wouldn't allow it. He stepped beside her and took her hand. She still avoided his gaze, staring at the floor. The turmoil inside her reached an unbearable level. Kate heard the blood rushing in her ears, her throat felt tight, her stomach was burning.

"GrantWould you like me to dance?" asked Leopold.

He didn't wait for her answer, but took her hand in his and placed the other on her waist. He had instructed the violinist to play a waltz, given the evening's progression, which he now did seamlessly. So the two of them floated across the roof in waltz time, with the silhouette of downtown Manhattan behind them like a mountain range strung with tinsel, and the firmament above them.

"I'm not a very good dancer," Kate said

embarrassedly after the first few turns.

“You dance excellently,” Leopold assured.

Kate noticed that people in the surrounding buildings were coming to the windows and onto their balconies to watch them dance. They probably think we're lovers, she thought, and this scene is so romantic, like something out of a romance film. And so it is. But only now. What about after? What about tomorrow? She looked at Leopold. He seemed so happy. "This is all beautiful, Leopold," she said—it was just a whisper—"but I don't know if I can do it. Jump, I mean. Although the incentive is great, I admit. People think I'm strong. But I'm not."

"The only person who is brave," said Leopold, "is the one who sees most clearly what lies before him and who, whether it be glory or danger, is not afraid to go towards it."

Kate blinked away a tear that was welling up in her eyes. Leopold involuntarily slowed his pace and brought his lips closer to hers. Kate didn't shy away. A moment later, they were united in a passionate kiss, their hearts beating against each other. Kate's knees went weak, almost buckling, but even if they did, she felt Leopold's strong arm holding her.

Finally, Kate broke away from the kiss. When had she felt anything like it? Yet there was also sadness in her heart. "The moment I start believing in you, you'll disappear," she said. "That's always how it is for me. Oh, what the hell…"

Leopold wanted to say something, but he didn't get the chance because Kate gagged him with a kiss full of power and passion, and above all full of defiance against her fate, which would surely take away from her what she had once begun to love in a way that was as vile as it was banal.

Leopold opened his eyes and at first didn't know where he was. A cat was looking through the window

outside. It also seemed to be wondering what he was doing there. Little by little, he remembered what had happened the night before. He and Kate had danced. Then they had kissed. And then...

With a quick movement, Leopold turned around. Kate lay beside him, sleeping peacefully. A strand of her tangled

Her hair hung in front of her slightly parted lips, rising into the air with each exhalation. How enchanting she looked. He wanted to cry with happiness.

Leopold got up and, still feeling rather sleepy, trotted into the kitchen, where he immediately began making coffee. He had now found a way to get the toaster to toast just right: using a timer that turned the appliance off after exactly two minutes. This way, he got toast the way it should be: golden like honey, crispy on the outside, and soft on the inside.

It wasn't long before Charlie, lured by the smell of coffee, stomped out of his room and into the kitchen. His hair was sticking out all over his head, his eyes just narrow, light-sensitive slits. He and Patrice had grown closer that evening, and it looked as if she was giving him a chance. However, he would have to make an effort and use more of what he called "Leopold-smooching." He didn't particularly like the prospect.

"Good morning, Charles," Leopold greeted. "How did your evening with Patrice go?"

"Good," Charlie replied. "Fine. And you?"

"Good.Nice," Leopold imitated Charlie.

Charlie grinned. He watched Leopold for a while as he filled the bread basket with rolls, placed jam and cheese on a tray, and conjured up a breakfast that, along with the smell of coffee, made your mouth water. Charlie knew what it meant when a man stayed until morning and made breakfast. Things were serious between Leopold and his sister.

"Don't you think the time has come to finally tell me who you really are?" he asked.

Leopold looked up and stared at him in surprise. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I don't mind putting on this count show all day," Charlie explained, "but I don't feel like
'Stuart - Part 2'. I mean, if you don't know Kate well,

you might think she's pretty resilient

But she hasn't always had it easy and deep down she's pretty—"

Leopold placed his hand calmingly on Charliethe

Shoulder.Charlie's concern for his sister honored and touched Leopold.
"I understand you very well," he assured her.

"Really?" asked

Charlie.Yes."

"Then come on, who are you?"

Leopold looked Charlie seriously, even solemnly, in the eyes. “I am the Man, the Her Sister loves", said he with oneIntensity that does not even have the slightestone Doubt tolerated.That's a start, Charlie thought, and left it at that.

His gaze fell on the sink, where all the dishes from the evening's dinner were piled high. "It's high time we explained how to use the dishwasher to our count," Charlie murmured.

Meanwhile, Kate also awoke from her slumber. The first thing she did was reach to the other side of the bed and was shocked to find it empty. She knew only too well what it meant when a guy sneaked off the next morning. But then she heard the clatter of dishes from the kitchen. And was that the smell of coffee that reached her nose?

Kate hurriedly got up and threw on her dressing gown. Her slippers slid silently across the floor. She found Leopold and Charlie busy with the dishwasher. "Then close the door," Charlie was explaining, "and press this button. And if I may give you some advice: always turn it on when Kate can see it. Because if she doesn't see you do it, she'll think it happened by itself."

That's just typical of my brother, thought Kate, smiling indulgently. She waited a few more seconds

and then made herself known with a clear throat. "Now, Leo," Charlie whispered to Leopold. Leopold closed the dishwasher door and switched it on. Then he turned to Kate. "A cup of coffee?"

"With pleasure." Kate saw the beautifully set breakfast table and could hardly believe it. Stuart had never made breakfast for her. She approached and sat down cautiously, as if afraid that too much movement might burst the beautiful scene like a soap bubble. Leopold sat down, too. He held out the bread basket to her. She took a slice of toast and spread it with strawberry jam.

Charlie stood a little way off, observing the scene that seemed straight out of a furniture store catalog. Home sweet home, happiness alone. He envied no one more than his sister.

"Sit with us, Charles," Leopold urged him. "There's enough here." Charlie shook his head. "I'm too tired," he said.
"I'm going to lie down again." In truth, he didn't want to disturb her. Kate was astonished. Since when had her brother had such tact?

After breakfast, Kate and Leopold visited the Museum of Modern Art. Not without ulterior motives, Kate thought. She hoped he would give himself away by identifying a painting that, if it had really been from 1876, he couldn't possibly know. But Leopold recognized a Monet—"This new style of painting seems to have caught on," he said—but was completely perplexed by Picasso, Max Ernst, and Jasper Jones. Kate gave up trying to outsmart him.

With the sun shining brightly against a blue sky, interrupted only occasionally by a few fair-weather clouds, they decided to go to Central Park. Hand in hand, they strolled to the Bethesda Fountain, where they weren't the only lovers there, rented a boat, and rowed out onto the lake. Kate was happier than she had been in a long time.

It was already afternoon when they left the park. Leopold became increasingly thoughtful. He wished

he could have stayed here, with Kate. But he also thought of Stuart. And of Otis, the fatherly friend he missed. A shiver ran down his spine as he realized that Otis must have been buried for many decades.

Kate was about to ask him why he had suddenly become so quiet when Leopold stopped and stared at an old but well-preserved townhouse. The next moment, his hand slipped from Kate's and he ran across the street. Less than a minute later, she saw him disappear through the open front door of the house.

Kate no longer understood anything. She ran after him and found him standing in the middle of a large hall, looking around, moved. How could she have known that he was in his uncle's house, in the very room where the ball had taken place, where he was supposed to choose his bride? That had been a few days ago for him—and yet more than 120 years ago. The wallpaper on the walls was different now, the furniture was different. But the room remained the same in its stiff dignity.

"Where are we?" asked Kate.

"In theMy uncle Millard's house," Leopold explained.

Then something occurred to him. He hurried across the hall, disappeared through a door, and ran up a staircase. Kate followed him, but stopped at the foot of the stairs and looked at a painting. A man, a woman, and a boy. A brass plaque on the frame read: Lord Leopold, Earl of Albany, the Countess, and their son, Leopold II.

Kate read the caption several times, glancing up at the picture in between, especially observing the boy. The resemblance to Leopold was unmistakable. But there was something else that strangely bothered her. Didn't he seem terribly unhappy in his stiff, formal posture? She felt sympathy and wondered if this was really Leopold or just an ancestor with whom he identified for reasons she couldn't fathom.

A short time later, Kate found Leopold in a room with a sign on the door that read "Office." She approached Leopold and said softly, yet a little

urgently, "I don't know who owns this house, but we can't just—"

Leopold turned around and the moved expression on his face silenced her. "These are my former chambers," he said. Then his gaze fell on the mirror, which, despite

He had left it in its place during the remodeling. Leopold thought again of the evening of the ball, when he had seen himself in the mirror exactly the same way. And of Stuart's pen, which Otis had placed in the hiding place in the bathroom known only to them. Maybe it was still there.

Leopold ran excitedly next door. When Kate also entered, she saw him already fiddling with the stucco decorations, paint flaking off. He managed to open the drawer. He reached inside. The pewter box was still there. With trembling hands, he opened it.

Kate approached. The box contained gold coins, pins, and all sorts of knick-knacks; but there was also a Bowery Savings Bank pen inside. "I kept everything here that was important to me and that I didn't want my uncle to find," Leopold said, taking out a ring. "It belonged to my mother."

Kate looked at the gold ring, sparkling with rubies and diamonds. "It's beautiful," she said. She sensed how deeply Leopold was stirred by all this. She, too, was deeply moved. At the same time, she understood less and less what was going on. Did this mean he really came from another time?

Leopold put the ring in his vest pocket,He put the box back in its place and smiled. He was happy to have rediscovered a piece of his personal past and saved it for this new era. Nevertheless, he had no idea what would happen next—to him and Kate.

They left Millard's old townhouse. Leopold suddenly felt a desire to see the Brooklyn Bridge. For him, it was not just a bridge from Manhattan to Brooklyn, but also from today to yesterday, from Kate's present to his. They crossed Manhattan by bus, which took some time, even on a Saturday with less traffic than usual.

Throughout the journey, Leopold talked about himself and his time: about his parents, who had died

young; about his strict Uncle Millard, who mourned a glorious time that had already been lost; about Otis, the loyal servant and friend. And again and again about his inventions, not least his

Passenger elevator, the necessity of which had been so wonderfully confirmed to him by the time travel.

At first, he fell silent at the sight of the bridge with its neo-Gothic towers. Kate didn't say anything either. Until now, she had paid little attention to the buildings she had passed so often since living in New York. But this time it was different. Leopold's fascination was transferred to her. Suddenly, she saw the city through his eyes.

The two crossed the bridge and rested on a bench. Leopold put his arm around Kate's shoulders. The sun was already slanting in the sky, about to touch the skyscrapers, turning itself and the sky increasingly red, as if it had been slashed by the tops of the skyscrapers.

"It's strange," Kate said after a long silence. "I live on an island connected to the rest of the world only by bridges. But I've never crossed any of them. I've lived here for ten years and I've never even seen the other side." Only when she said it did Kate realize how true this statement actually was to her life. She had only ever seen her side.

“Have you never traveled?” Leopold asked in surprise.

Kate shook her head. They fell silent again, lost for a moment in the sunset. Then Kate turned her head and asked, "Do you miss your world?" She didn't know if she really believed him, but at the moment they were so close that she almost couldn't help herself.

Leopold also looked at her. "In a way," he said after a moment's thought. "I miss her rhythm."

"Hewas a little more leisurely, huh?"

"A little, yes." He smiled at her.

"Like today for us?"Leopold nodded.

By the time Kate and Leopold arrived home, it was already night. They had brought some food from a Chinese restaurant. They were sitting by the open

window, stretching their feet out, and eating glass noodles from cardboard boxes.

Bamboo shoots, chicken, and vegetables in sweet and sour sauce. Then, somewhere from another open window, they heard a clock strike midnight. Kate buried her face in Leopold's shoulder. "It's Sunday," she said with a touch of despair. "I want more 1876."

"But we still have the whole day," Leopold replied, surprised. "You don't have to work, and we can indulge in a little more slowness."

"Not me. Sunday is the day before Monday. He's already infected from Monday."

"Understand."

She lifted her head from his shoulder. "Besides, we're shooting our commercial tomorrow."

Leopold had completely forgotten that. Kate leaned against him again, and together they listened to the city. Occasionally, a police or ambulance siren would reach them, voices or music or the sound of a television would come from another apartment. Kate was so relaxed that her eyes closed and she began to doze.

Leopold reached into his vest pocket and pulled out his mother's ring. He'd wanted to do something all this time, and now he felt the moment was right. He felt his pulse quicken. "Kate," he said gently. She made only one sound that expressed her complete well-being. "Would you..." Leopold began, then stopped and started again. "Have you considered...?"

Then Kate opened her eyes and looked at him. "What?"

Leopold took a deep breath, sighed, and slipped the ring back into his vest pocket. "It's time to go to sleep," he said simply. Kate nodded but didn't get up. Leopold put his arms around her, picked her up, and carried her into the bedroom. She snuggled close to him, murmuring something Leopold only half-understood. It wasn't important, either. She felt comfortable, that was all that mattered.

In the bedroom, he laid Kate down on the bed and

tucked her in. Her eyes were closed the whole time, but the smile on her lips revealed that she was well aware of what was happening. "You

"Serve me as your Otis served you," she said finally. "You are my Otis."

"Very well, Your Grace," Leopold replied with a smile. Then he wanted to leave. But Kate took his hand and held him back.

"Don't go," she said. "Stay with me."

Leopold turned off the light and lay down next to Kate. She immediately took his hand again. That blissful smile still lingered on her lips as she slowly drifted off to sleep. Leopold looked at her face, illuminated by the moonlight.

"I love you, Kate McKay," he said after a while.

11

Leo sat in an old-fashioned wingback chair, a velvet-covered monstrosity with a musty breath, and watched as if from a throne as the busily film crew prepared to shoot the commercial. A set had been constructed in the studio that bore a striking resemblance to Leopold's bedroom. This was because the set had been built according to Leopold's instructions. Beyond the cameras sat the director and technicians, as well as a few people from Farmer's Bounty and MRG. Kate was the last to join them. But there was no time for greetings, because the director was already shouting "Action!" across the studio.

Leopold assumed a very measured demeanor. Then an actor dressed as a butler entered, bringing a roll and a pack of Farmer's Bounty on a silver tray. Leopold recited his line, buttering the roll as he did so. Then he took a bite—and his smile faded from his face, even turning into an expression of disgust. As soon as the director stopped the take, Leopold pulled out his handkerchief and, disgusted, spat the bite into it.

"Excuse me," he addressed the director, pointing to the contents of his handkerchief, "was that Farmer's Bounty on the roll?"

The director looked at him in surprise. "Yes," he replied.

"Why?"

"It tastes like the soap I use to clean my saddle."

"N/aand?"

Leopold couldn't believe it. Didn't the man care at all? He launched into a loud lecture about his principles, among which truthfulness held a special place. Or were they trying to make him out to be one of those hawkers who hawked fake miracle ointments on the streets? As he ranted about the director, it

became increasingly clear to Leopold that he wasn't actually talking about him, but rather the person who had humiliated him in such a way and in front of the whole world: Kate.

Kate initially didn't notice the argument between the director and Leopold. It wasn't until it escalated into a full-blown riot, which ultimately ended with Leopold angrily leaving the set and everyone turning to her for help, that she realized things had gotten out of hand. She hurried after him. He hadn't gone far. He paced restlessly back and forth in the hallway outside the studio door. She watched him for a while, then spoke to him.

"What's going on, Leo? They need you to film the rest of the spot."

He looked at her with flashing eyes. "I want nothing to do with this," he said. "I refuse."

Kate recoiled. She wanted to touch him, but pulled her hand back. "Why?" she simply asked.

"Have you ever tried this crap?"

"Farmer's Bounty"No." She still didn't understand what his problem was.

"Still, you had no qualms about letting me promote it."

"Are you accusing me of cheating on you?"

"All I'm saying is, the whole thing stinks. Just like that spread."

"My God," exclaimed Kate, "it's just margarine."

Leopold's expression became even more serious and at the same time more accusatory. He wondered if she couldn't understand him or if she didn't want to. "It's my name. It's my face. I stand behind it with everything I am. It will be recorded and broadcast everywhere."

Kate couldn't understand it. Why was he making such a fuss over such a trivial matter? All sorts of stars were using their so-called good names to endorse all sorts of things, and no one seriously believed they used them themselves. "Please," she said. "I'm sorry you don't like Farmer's Bounty, but this is reality, and in reality, you just have to be able

to swallow something and see things through."

Leopold flinched when he heard the word reality. Uncle Millard also liked to use it, and he had a deep

deep-rooted aversion to it because it usually meant sacrificing one's self-respect.

Kate's voice became urgent, even demanding, as she continued:

"This is an important contract for my company, Leo. If you don't go back in, I'll lose everything I've worked for. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

Her words didn't have the desired effect. Quite the opposite. Leopold's resentment grew, as did his contempt. "So this is your job, Kate?" he exclaimed. "Research that only serves to deceive people? To refine lies until they sound like the truth?"

Kate stamped her foot angrily. "I don't have time for this nonsense," she cried. "This is the second time you've ruined my trip with your old-fashioned principles. And this time you won't be able to make it up to me with a romantic dinner on the roof." Leopold took a step back and shook his head. He didn't understand this world. "What is wrong with you?" he asked. "You have every conceivable amenity, every comfort, but you don't care about integrity."

"I don't," Kate replied. "And I don't have time for the high-flown speeches of a man from a bygone century who never had to work a single day in his life."

"You have no idea what I've done with my life."

"And you have no idea what I've done with mine. When I started at MRG on a summer job, I was a nobody. When my parents died, I stayed. I stayed and paid for my little brother's schooling. You're wrong if you think my life has been full of comforts and conveniences, Leo. I've spent my whole life paying off debts. And I'm so tired of it. I need peace of mind, you know? And if it means selling that crap called Farmer's Bounty, then I'll do it!"

Her anger hit him like a firestorm. He had to admit that his accusations had perhaps been a bit hasty.

On the other hand, he didn't like her work any better just because he understood her motives. Nevertheless, he relented. "As you wish," he simply said and returned to the studio.

Kate stood in front of the door for a moment. Her whole body was shaking. Her anger had carried her away. She had said things she had hoped no one would ever find out. Now there was nothing she could do about it. But there was something else that worried her. For the first time, she had learned that she and Leopold truly came from two different worlds.

Stuart was sitting in the group room of the psychiatric ward, playing Ludo with one of the patients. It was rather uninspiring, though, because he could have cheated without his blank-eyed counterpart noticing. "Your turn," Stuart said, looking out the barred window. His gaze fell on a large digital clock on the roof of a bench, which alternately displayed the temperature and the time. Sunday – 4:30 p.m.

He turned around and saw Gretchen, Dr. Bernstein's nurse. She was leaning against the wall, clipboard in hand, watching Stuart. He immediately noticed that she had a soft spot for him. Maybe he resembled her brother, or her ex-boyfriend, who had dumped her for another woman and whom she still couldn't stop loving. Either way, Stuart decided to capitalize on this attraction.

"I like you, Gretchen," he said, "and I think you're smarter than your boss, Dr. Bernstein."

"Really?" she asked, coming closer. Her eyes widened, two small blue seas.

"Dr. Bernstein only sees the obvious," Stuart continued,

"But there are things that cannot be seen, and yet they exist nonetheless. Like time, for example.

Scientists call it the fourth dimension. But unfortunately, our senses only perceive three dimensions. Like this chair, for example. Or your pretty face."

Gretchensmiled and took another step closer.

Stuart looked at her with sad seriousness. "Do you think I don't know how crazy it sounds when I claim there's a rift in the space-time continuum over the East River? But it's no different than a dog suddenly seeing a rainbow. Dogs are colorblind, you know."

"Oh."

Stuart realized he was on the right track. Gretchen's grip on her clipboard had loosened, and she was listening attentively to his words. For the first time, she didn't seem to see him as a madman.

"Imagine, Gretchen," he said, "we could suddenly see time instead of just feeling it. What would lie before us? A world as unimaginable to us as a rainbow is to a dog. Yet as real as the chair I'm sitting on. If we could really see time, maybe we'd also see the gaps and cracks. And that's exactly what I've found. A crack in something no one can see. I am the dog who saw the rainbow. And none of the other dogs believe me."

A tear of emotion welled up in Gretchen's eyes. She had seen countless of these movies, where no one believed the hero's claim that the world was threatened by aliens, monsters, or some other incredible danger. No one, except for one person, usually the romantic heroine. Gretchen decided she wanted to be that person.

Some time later, Stuart hobbled down the hospital corridor on his crutches, heading for the exit. As the automatic door closed behind him, he paused for a moment to savor the scent of freedom. But not for long, because he knew time was running out. It was already getting dark.

Leopold lay on the couch. The small and large catastrophes of the past day flickered before his eyes on the television, but he didn't notice any of them. The

whole time, he couldn't help thinking about the argument with Kate, about the words she had said to him on the taxi ride home. "We've met each other."

something. We're completely different. What do we know about each other? I don't even know who you really are." That had hit him hard. He had assumed that she finally believed what he had told her. With a few sentences, she had destroyed everything that had developed between them. "We had a great weekend," she said at last, "and that's it. It's Sunday evening, the weekend is over." She hadn't even looked at him when she said that.

Then he heard the apartment door unlock. Bart, who had just been lying next to the sofa, sadly staring at Leopold, jumped up and ran to the door, barking. Leopold followed. To his astonishment, he saw Stuart come in. He hadn't thought about him at all.

Bart jumped at Stuart and would have knocked him over if he hadn't slumped against the wall. Then the two men's eyes met.

Leopold knew what Stuart would demand of him before he even opened his mouth. Stuart hobbled closer. "It must be done," he said simply.

Leopold shook his head. He couldn't just leave behind. Perhaps she would come to her senses. While Stuart explained to him with growing agitation that he had to leave, otherwise his descendants, including Stuart and everyone else still living in this country, would suddenly vanish into nothingness, Leopold thought only of her. When Stuart had finished, he simply replied: "Even if I went back, I won't marry. How could I choose a wife when I fell in love here? I would only make her and myself unhappy."

Stuart shuddered. A premonition came over him. "Kate?"he asked hoarsely.

Leopold nodded. Then he told him what had happened. Stuart listened, moved. Although he still had a great affection for Kate, he felt no jealousy. If it hadn't been a matter of life and death for him, he

would have wished them happiness. But as it was, he had no choice but to talk Leopold out of his love for Kate.

"You must return, Leopold," he urged again and again, and finally asked him to come with him so that he could give him something

Stuart hobbled to his desk, picked up his chronicle of the royal family, and opened it. He knew the page number by heart. "Read it," he asked, pointing to a short article that appeared to have come from an old newspaper and was titled: Tragedy of a Servant Without a Master.

With each line Leopold read, his concern grew. Finally, he looked up and asked, "When do we have to leave?"

"There's still some time," Stuart replied with relief. "You'll return exactly on April 28th. Because of that, you may repeat some things. You'll probably see me too. That's okay. You just shouldn't follow me this time. Just concentrate on choosing the woman you'll marry."

Leopold felt a pang in his heart. His fingers slid into the pocket of his vest where he kept his mother's ring. He had almost given it to Kate. It was a good thing he hadn't. For a moment, he considered at least saying goodbye to her. Stuart seemed to guess his thoughts. "No," he said simply.

Leopold nodded. It was better this way.

Kate woke long before her usual alarm clock rang. It had just gotten light; the city that never slept seemed to have finally taken a nap before the end of the night, from which it now stretched. The same was true for Kate. She, too, had barely slept a wink last night. Until well after midnight, she had tried to write Leopold a letter, to apologize for her harshness, to explain everything to him... But she hadn't found the words, leaving only a pile of paper balls behind.

Now she got up and got dressed. There was no sound from Stuart's apartment upstairs. Of course not, she then realized, it was only six o'clock. Leopold would surely still be asleep.

Kate waited another quarter of an hour, then

couldn't stand it any longer. She climbed the fire escape to Stuart's apartment and looked inside through the slightly open window.

Determined, she pushed the window open and climbed in. She stood there, perplexed, for a moment. Then her gaze fell on Stuart's desk, where a thick book lay open among his countless papers. She stepped closer.

Kate was shocked when she saw the old photo. It clearly showed Leopold. It was apparently a reprint of a clipping from the New York Herald from 1876—her eyes searched for the date—1876!

She quickly skimmed the article, which reported the suicide of Count Leopold of Albany, who had committed suicide on the night of
On April 28, he took his own life by jumping from the unfinished Brooklyn Bridge. With that in mind, Kate found another note. Under the heading: Tragedy of a Servant Without a Master, she read: "On the same night that the Earl of Albany took his own life, his servant Otis also succumbed to a heart attack. Shortly after learning of his master's death, he collapsed in the street." The Otis of whom Leopold had spoken with so much respect, even love.

Could Leopold and Stuart's story be true after all? Kate took a step back. Her heart was pounding wildly. She no longer knew what to believe. Love is a leap, Leopold had said, quoting Otis. Not just love, but faith too.

Her gaze fell on a sketch by Stuart. She picked it up. It showed the exact spot where the rift in time would open. It lay over the East River; if you jumped off the bridge, you'd fly right through it. Stuart had also marked the spot from which you had to jump. She knew it, because she had often stood there with Stuart. For romantic reasons, she had thought. But in truth, for scientific reasons, as she now realized.

You're an idiot, Stuart, she thought again, dropping the sketch with the rest of the papers. This is all complete nonsense.

Then she left the apartment, not even bothering to

look for Leopold, which had been the real reason she had come.

I really have more important things to do than chase after a guy who doesn't want to grow up, she thought.

In the evening, Jansen hosted a small reception to mark the beginning of theadvertising campaign. On this occasion, JJ would announce who his future partner at the agency would be. Despite the botched dinner, Kate still had good prospects. JJ may have had neither morals nor decency, as Leopold had rightly recognized, but he was enough of a businessman to know that she was simply the best.

After the last-minute success in the Farmer's Bounty, a completely relaxed atmosphere prevailed at MRG that day. The tension of the past few weeks had vanished, and instead of nervous glances, friendly words were exchanged. Kate also had a quiet day; she made a few phone calls, analyzed statistics; it was more like a pastime. She would have been grateful for some serious distraction. Then she wouldn't have had to think about Leopold all the time.

Just before closing time, Darci brought in a foil-wrapped evening dress that she'd taken to the dry cleaners on Kate's behalf. "You should change," she urged. "The reception starts at eight, and it's almost seven."

Kate jumped. Her mind had been on Leopold and she hadn't even noticed her assistant. "Is something wrong with you?" asked Darci.

"Everything's okay," Kate replied. "Will you leave me alone for a moment?"

Darci went outside, but surreptitiously watched Kate through the glass door.

Kate had come to a decision. She'd overreacted yesterday, probably due to the pressure she'd been under because of that commercial. Leopold was right, after all; her job was a bit of a lie. In any case, an argument like this was no reason to end something that had started so hopefully. She loved him; she felt that more clearly now than ever before.

She picked up the phone and dialed Stuart's

number. Unfortunately, the answering machine answered. "Hi, Leopold," she said,
"This is Kate. I just wanted to say... I'm sorry about what happened. Maybe we can talk again. After work. I have

later, this reception at Jansen's. Maybe we can meet before... or after. I hope to see you tonight. I miss you..." With that, she hung up.

"...I hope to see you tonight. I miss you..." Click - she had hung up.

Stuart stood on his crutches next to the telephone, listening to every word. Poor Kate, he thought. Poor Leopold. His regret was genuine. But it was only a fly in the ointment in his overwhelming joy. If there was a winner in this, he was it.

Stuart hobbled to the piano, slumped down on the stool, and first strummed just a few chords before beginning to play something from Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier. There was no music on the music stand in front of him—he knew that piece by heart—but what he saw was like music to him too. He had the photos of his trip down memory lane developed. Pictures of the unfinished Brooklyn Bridge. Of old New York. And a whole host of snapshots he'd taken at Leopold's ball. And all in brilliant color. These photos would make him rich and famous.

"Hi, Stu," a voice called from behind him. Charlie. He had heard the music and come up the fire escape. "How's it going? Where's Leo?"

Stuart turned around but said nothing. Then he turned back and continued playing. Charlie came to the piano. Over Stuart's shoulder, he saw the photos on the music stand. His eyes widened in astonishment. "Holy crap," he exclaimed. "What is that?"

Stuart enjoyed his astonishment. Just like Charlie, the whole world would soon be wide-eyed and open-mouthed. But he remained silent.

Charlie took the photos and flipped through them. "Are these real?" he asked. "Or how did you do that? Man, look at this! Did you see that? Kate's in that one! And here too!"

Stuart missed, and the piano made a discordant noise, as if someone had stepped on its toes. With a violent movement

He snatched the photos from Charlie. Indeed, Kate was visible in one of the ball photos, in the background, but unmistakably so. He flipped through the pictures and noticed her in other shots as well. But how was that possible?

Stuart's thoughts raced behind his forehead. What could this mean? How did Kate get those photos? What was she doing in Leopold's time? Just as Leopold was doing in our time, something inside him answered. After a while, he realized he'd posed the wrong question. The question wasn't what the two were doing in the time so foreign to them, but what they had found. And only then did Stuart fully understand what had happened and what still had to happen.

Kate had hoped Leopold would at least call back. But nothing, not a word, not the slightest sign of life. Did that mean he'd closed the matter? Had he perhaps already left town? Her heart raced at the thought.

After a final grace period, Darci came in, picked up the dress, which was still hanging untouched on a filing cabinet, and stood demandingly in front of Kate. "It's okay," Kate exclaimed before Darci could say anything, took the dress, and disappeared into the ladies' room to change. Darci followed her.

Kate looked stunning in the shimmering silver dress. Darci helped her with her hair. "I just don't understand where Leopold disappeared to," she said as her assistant fiddled with her hair.

"Where would he be?" Darci replied. "Maybe he's getting drunk. He's just a guy like any other, great manners or not. That can wait until tomorrow. You're already late. The car is waiting."

Kate applied her lip and eye makeup, powdered her nose, then Darci pushed her into the hallway. Kate was about to head for the stairwell, but Darci walked

purposefully toward the elevator. "Hey, Kate thought. "They're leaving again," Darci explained, "in just as mysterious a way as they disappeared."

Kate didn't know why, but somehow it worried her. Hadn't Stuart claimed the elevators had broken down because Leopold had been torn from his time before he could make this technological invention? Nonsense, the voice of reason in her head contradicted. Pure coincidence.

Her gaze wandered to the floor display. They were counting down one by one. Suddenly, something like an electric shock ran through her. Something that had always been there, but she had never noticed. On the metal cover plate, it said Otis. She had always assumed that was the name of the elevator manufacturer. And that was what it was. But suddenly, she also thought she knew why the company bore that name: in recognition of a friend of the founder.

"Oh my God!" Kate exclaimed. She felt like she was about to faint, as if all her blood was rushing from her head to her legs in a matter of seconds. Suddenly she realized that Stuart and Leopold had told the truth. Leopold had come from the past. The fact that the elevators were working again could only mean one thing: With Stuart's help, he had traveled back to his time and made his invention there. But before that, he had chosen a bride that evening and started a family with her.

The elevator ground to a stop. Tears filled Kate's eyes. As the doors opened, she staggered through the lobby and out.

"Everything"Okay?" asked Darci.

Nothing was okay. She loved a man who had lived over a hundred years ago. What was okay about that?

12

Leopold jumped out of the carriage and strode toward the entrance of the house. Otis hurried behind him. In the garden, servants were busy decorating the trees with garlands and hanging lanterns. A butler opened the door and greeted him, but Leopold didn't respond. His boots left mud marks on the smooth marble of the hall. So he ran toward the stairs.

The jump from the Brooklyn Bridge had brought Leopold back to his time, as Stuart had predicted, and exactly
to April 28, 1876. He had suddenly found himself at the unfinished bridge, just before Roebling began his speech. But the memory of the future, especially of Kate, hadn't left him. He had also seen Stuart again and even picked up the pen he had lost. But this time he hadn't followed him.

"Leopold! Where were you?" a familiar voice called out.

Uncle Millard, that's right. Just like the first time, he hobbled toward his nephew, his brow furrowed in annoyance. Leopold simply kept walking, ignoring his uncle's angry words, which Otis now had to take instead.

Leopold disappeared into his room and made himself a brandy. The whole time, he held Stuart's pen in his hand, moving his face back and forth. Click, click, click. His thoughts were on Kate the whole time. What the heck, he thought. I'm mourning a woman who won't be born for about a hundred years.

A little later, Otis came in and announced that the bath was ready. Leopold undressed and climbed into the tub, but not without another brandy and the pen. Just like the first time, Otis took the pen from him and placed it in the secret compartment behind the stucco decoration.

"Permit me a word, Your Grace?" he then asked.

Leopold allowed it, knowing what was coming anyway. Otis advised him, as he had the first time, to make the most of the evening and suggested that there might be a gem among the ladies. "Love is a leap," he concluded.

"Love is a lie," Leopold replied, emptying his brandy glass. Otis was struck by the bitterness that came from these words. Silently, he handed his master a towel.

Leopold rose from the water. He had been hearing carriages pulling up to the house the whole time. The first guests were arriving.

The limo sent by Jansen Food came to a stop. Kate looked outside, blinked, and turned to the driver in disbelief. "That can't be it," she said. "336 Madison Avenue—that's the address I was going to."

The dark-skinned chauffeur turned to her. “This is 336 Madison Avenue," he said politely.

Still incredulous, Kate got out. She stood in front of Leopold's house, or rather, his Uncle Millard's house, as Kate remembered. The people from Jansen Food had obviously rented it for the reception. Coincidence? Providence? Or simply psychological cruelty at the hands of sadistic forces of fate?

Kate gathered herself and entered. Phil and Bob met her in the hall. They both gave her a quick look. They obviously liked what they saw. "You look great," Phil said. Kate tried to smile, but it failed. She walked past them, only to hear Bob whisper, "Did you see that? Kate's actually wearing a dress!"

The salon was crowded with men in suits and women in evening gowns. Tables had been set up with Jansen Food products, rolls spread with Farmer's Bounty lay untouched on silver trays, and posters for the new advertising campaign hung everywhere. Leopold's oversized image smiled at Kate, watching

her with dozens of eyes. Her throat felt tight.

After a short while, she spotted JJ in the crowd. She pushed her way toward him, overhearing fragments of meaningless conversation about new BMWs, plastic surgery, and cell phones.

She might have been able to endure all this better in another place, but not in Leopold's house.

As she joined JJ, she felt a strange emptiness despite the crowd. What am I doing here? she suddenly asked herself. What am I doing with all these people? JJ greeted her and introduced her to his interlocutor. Kate, too, perceived this as a film playing in front of her, in which she played no role.

"Ihave to get out of here," she said, more to herself.

"What?" asked JJ

"Excuse meme. I'll be right back."

"Phil is about to give his speech. I think he'd like you to say a few words afterward."

Kate barely heard it; she was already gone. She hurried out of the hall, ran past Leopold's family portrait, up the stairs, and into his chambers. It became increasingly clear to her that she had lost something irretrievable. Her emotions overwhelmed her, tears streamed down her face and smudged her mascara. She entered Leopold's bedroom and stood in front of the mirror. I look horrible, she thought, and not just because of the runny makeup. Her gaze remained transfixed by the mirror, while the tears streamed freely down her face.

Disgusted with himself and with life, Leopold looked at himself in the mirror. Otis and a servant had dressed him, and now he stood there in a tails suit, a figure the ladies would adore. Leopold turned to his uncle, who had just examined his invention and spoken condescendingly of it, and was now approaching.

"You talk about inventions and progress, Leopold," he said. "What I have to offer you is reality. Find yourself a woman. Get married."

Leopold felt that this conversation didn't get any better with repetition—quite the opposite. Therefore,

he was keen to cut it short. "Let's not beat around the bush," he said. "Just tell me who I should marry. Which of the ladies gathered downstairs has the most money?"

A satisfied smile came across Uncle Millard's face, even though he disliked his nephew's sarcastic tone. At least Leopold seemed to be beginning to see reason, just in time. "Miss Tree comes from a very wealthy family," he said.
"Butnaturally -"

Leopold silenced him with a gesture of his hand.
"Consider it decided that Miss Tree will be my wife," he said. "Get the ring, Otis. I will announce my choice at midnight."

Otis, who had been waiting by the door, nodded and stepped into the bathroom to get the ring from the tin box.

Kate entered Leopold's bathroom. The box must still be in the secret compartment in the wall. It was the only thing of his that she had left. He certainly wouldn't mind if she took it. Phil's voice, amplified by the PA system, drifted from the hall. Phil wasn't exactly what you'd call a gifted speaker. He certainly wouldn't say more than he absolutely had to. So she had to hurry.

Kate opened the secret compartment. The tin box was still there. Since Leopold had returned to his time, the ring was back in it too. But when she tried to touch it, it vanished into thin air before her eyes. She was frightened. What did that mean? That Leopold had put it on someone else's finger? Kate felt uncomfortable. What am I doing here? she asked herself. No, she didn't want anything to do with Leopold. He had married someone else. She pushed the box back into its place, locked the secret compartment, and went back downstairs. To her surprise, Stuart and Charlie met her on the stairs.
"What are you doing here?" she asked them. "How did you get in?"

Stuart pressed an envelope containing the photos

into her hand. "You have to see this, Kate," Stuart said excitedly.
"I made a discovery –"

"I've had enough of your discoveries!" Kate interrupted angrily and tried to give him back the envelope. But he didn't take it.

She wanted to get past him, but Stuart stood in her way.

"It'll only take a minute," he insisted. "I know I was a loser as a friend. I'm sorry for that. I'm also sorry for letting you down so many times. You always wanted someone reliable. Someone reasonable. Forgive me that I couldn't be that. But before you leave, you should at least listen to me. Maybe our years together weren't wasted after all. Maybe there was a reason we were together."

Kate didn't understand a word. "What are you talking about?"

"I believe it was my destiny to bring you and Leopold together."

Kate looked at Stuart, aghast. What was he talking about? Had he completely lost his mind? And yet she embraced the small shred of hope he awakened in her as gratefully as a drowning man embraces something to cling to, even if it was just a straw.

"All this had to happen," Stuart explained. "I thought I had outsmarted time. But I never imagined that fate was also master of time. It was predestined that I would make my journey through time, and also that Leopold would follow me. He was meant to meet you and return to his time. And you were meant to follow him. Tonight. Before it's too late."

"How?" Kate asked, confused.

"The time portal is open until midnight," Stuart explained.

Phil's voice drifted from the hall. He was announcing Kate's entrance, and when she didn't appear, he repeated his call.

"Where are you, Kate?" It sounded joking and casual, but she knew he was getting nervous.

"You hear it yourself," said Kate. "I have to." She pushed past Stuart—a final attempt to return the envelope failed—and entered the room, her makeup long since restored. Phil fervently invited her to the podium.

Kate apologized for keeping everyone waiting. In her nervousness, the envelope containing the pictures slipped from her hand.

Some fell out and scattered across the desk. Kate paid no attention. Instead, she stammered awkwardly, frantically searching for an opening for her speech. "Tell us how you found Mr. Duke for the spot," Phil jumped in.

"Oh, right. Yes." She gave Phil a grateful look and began:

"In our business, two things matter: numbers and instinct. With Leopold, I relied entirely on my instincts. We were stuck with this campaign, so I thought about what the man I would buy margarine from would have to look like."

And to whom I would give my heart, my life, she thought. Pain rose within her, and she fought it down, at least enough to continue speaking.

"I imagined the ideal man. Of course, he would have to be good-looking, have a masculine charisma... The women among you know what I'm talking about. But he should also be cultured; have his own opinion, perhaps even an accent. Furthermore, and above all, he should be nice. A man with class, who listens patiently to a woman and sees her as she is. A man with integrity."

Yes, that's what Leopold had been: a man of integrity. And she had forced him to sacrifice his values, to lie for her, and to tarnish everything that had made him special. It no longer surprised her that he had left her.

Then her gaze fell on the photos that had been
They showed Leopold with a woman
danced. But in the background she saw herself, in the dress she was wearing. In the dress she was wearing? That was impossible! The dress was new; she was wearing it for the first time. She certainly couldn't have worn it to a ball that—if Stuart was to be believed—had taken place in 1876! She looked up and noticed Stuart and Charlie at the door. They were

obviously waiting for her. Then she made a decision.

"Isn't it weird," she said. "We're celebrating the launch of Farmer's Bounty and there are trays everywhere
with margarine rolls, but no one touches them. If we're honest, we all know why. Between us

spoken: Everyone in this room knows that Farmer's Bounty tastes like... hair gel."

Kate started laughing. But she seemed to be the only one who found it funny. A few of the suits started whispering to each other. JJ turned to Phil, his expression worried and angry. Kate didn't care. "I'm afraid I have to go now," she said simply. "Have a nice evening."

Photographs in hand, she hurriedly left the podium and a short time later ran out of the house with Stuart and Charlie. A taxi was already waiting on the street. The three of them jumped in. "To the Brooklyn Bridge," Stuart instructed the driver, "and fast."

Kate held out the photos she was still holding to Stuart. "Can you explain to me how I got these photos?" she asked.

"Quite simply," Stuart replied. "Because you were there."

"But I wasn't! Believe me, I would know."

Stuart looked at her. Kate thought she saw something like emotion or compassion in his eyes. Did he pity her for her ignorance? Or was there something else?

"From now on, you'll be there too," he said. "That is, if we make it in time." He looked out the side window, where cars were lined up in three lanes.

"But these photos are from the past," Kate insisted, "not the future."

"That's not entirely true. Theoretically, the future of someone who is about to go back in time is in the past. And these photos are from your future in the past."

Kate shookhis head. "I don't understand that."

Neither did the taxi driver. He eyed Stuart suspiciously in the rearview mirror.

"You don't have to understand, Kate," Stuart soothed, taking the photos from her hand. "You love

him, don't you?" She nodded.

"That's all you need to know. You just have to go back in time and marry the man you love before he

someonemarries differently."

"This is crazy."

"But pretty exciting," Charlie also spoke up.

Kate smiled, for the first time. She thought about seeing Leopold again soon. But then another thought occurred to her. "Wait a minute," she said to Stuart. "If I marry Leopold and you're his descendant, then you're also my—"

Stuart, not wanting to delve deeper into this sensitive topic, pretended he hadn't heard. Instead, he turned to the driver and urged him on.

The towers of the illuminated Brooklyn Bridge appeared before them. The taxi pulled over to the curb. Time was running out. Kate and Charlie started to run, but the taxi driver grabbed Stuart by the sleeve and held him back. "What about the money?" As Stuart pulled out his wallet, he noticed that Kate and Charlie had stopped. In the distance, the striking of a tower clock sounded. It wasn't long until midnight.

"Keep running, Kate!" Stuart called to her. "You know the place.

Where we both stood so often."

Kate's heart sank. Only now did she realize that she would never see the people she loved again—and despite all their differences, Stuart was still one of them. She gave up everything for the man she loved.

She ran with Charlie along the pedestrian bridge until she reached the point where she had to jump off. She climbed over the parapet. Below her, in the darkness of the night, lay the waters of the East River. Kate's knees trembled. She looked around for Charlie. This, too, was a farewell forever.

"Go on, Kate," he said, his eyes watering. "You have a wonderful future ahead of you. Don't worry about me. Leopold left me fifty thousand dollars on my pillow before he left. Do me a favor and do something

for yourself!"

"You've always been a great brother, Charlie," she said, crying and kissing him. "I will always love you."

"Stop it," Charlie replied. "This isn't Casablanca. Hurry up!"

“Don’t jump!” came a voice from behind her. "Please! Whatever problems you have, there's surely another solution!"

Kate and Charlie turned around. A police officer approached with hesitant steps. Kate looked down again. She gathered all her courage, closed her eyes, and thought: Love is a leap.

Then her legs gave way, she no longer felt anything beneath her that she was carrying, only the wind.

Leopold was breathing heavily. The moment he had been avoiding for so long was approaching ominously. Midnight had just struck. Otis approached him. "The ring, Your Grace." He held it out. Leopold thought of the moment he had almost slipped it on Kate's finger. Even now, he felt that it truly belonged to her. But over a hundred years lay between them.

Leopold stepped forward to the ball. The girls winked at him teasingly, their mothers and fathers practically bursting with anticipation. He had never seen his Uncle Millard as content as he was at that moment.

Leopold looked around. He noticed Stuart in the background, who had been secretly taking photographs, and let him leave unchallenged. This meant that a return to Kate was finally impossible for him. A deep pain filled his heart. "You know from my uncle," he said now, "that this evening I wish to choose from among the ladies present here the one with whom I intend to share my life."

"Leopold",a voice sounded.

A young woman broke away from the crowd and stepped in front of Leopold.

He couldn't believe his eyes. Kate! How did she get here?

"What are you doing here?" he asked. "How long have

you beenalready here?"

"Long enough to know that I like it here," she replied. Her radiant expression left no doubt that she

would have liked everywhere Leopold was.

He looked at her in surprise. "You want to stay?"

"I love you, Leo," she said. "I want to be with you wherever you are, past, present, or future."

Leopold's heart pounded with joy. He turned to the restless ball guests. "I hereby announce the name of my bride: Kate McKay."

While the disappointed crowd applauded moderately, he embraced Kate. Uncle Millard, however, seemed dissatisfied with his nephew's choice. Who was this strange woman? Otis looked all the happier. Apparently, his master had found a pearl after all.

Kate had a lot to explain to Leopold. But now wasn't the moment, because the music began. The two floated across the dance floor in waltz time, into a happy future.

HAPPY ENDING